SPHERE

NEW WORLDS 7

Edited by

Hilary Bailey & Charles Platt

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NEW WORLDS 7

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INTRODUCTION

With this edition of *New Worlds* I am handing over responsibility to Hilary Bailey and Charles Platt who have both been identified with the publication (as contributors and editors) for a good many years. This will give me more opportunity to write – it is some time since I was able to contribute to *New Worlds* as an author – and it will mean that an increasing number of up-and-coming writers will have the benefit of being read and helped by experienced editors who have not become, as, frankly, I feel I have become, jaded!

I have always contended that an editor can at most put in ten years of useful work before he becomes stale. This year I shall have been editing *New Worlds* off and on for ten years. It seems, therefore, that this a good moment to retire.

I shall, of course, continue to retain my connection, in an advisory capacity, but I believe that the new editors will bring (are already bringing) increased vitality to *New Worlds* and will thus continue its reputation for introducing more new writers, new readers and new ideas to speculative fiction over a greater number of years than any other publication in its field. In the future I hope to be allowed to contribute regularly to its pages.

Michael Moorcock

PALE ROSES

A Tale of the Dancers at the End of Time

MICHAEL MOORCOCK

Short summer-time and then, my heart's desire.
The winter and the darkness: one by one
The roses fall, the pale roses expire
Beneath the slow decadence of the sun.
Ernest Dowson, *Transition*

I

In Which Werther Is Inconsolable

'You can still *amuse* people, Werther, and that's the main thing,' said Mistress Christia, lifting her skirts to reveal her surprise.

It was rare enough for Werther de Goethe to put on an entertainment (though this one was typical – it was called 'Rain') and rare, too, for the Everlasting Concubine to think in individual terms to please her lover of the day.

'Do you like it?' she asked as he peered into her thighs.

Werther's voice in reply was faintly, unusually, animated. 'Yes.' His pale fingers traced the tattoos which were primarily on the theme of Death and the Maiden but corpses also coupled, skeletons entwined in a variety of extravagant carnal embraces – and at the centre, in bone-white, her pubic hair had been fashioned in the outline of an elegant and somehow quintessentially feminine skull. 'You alone know me, Mistress Christia.'

She had heard the phrase so often and it always delighted her. 'Cadaverous Werther!'

He bent to kiss the skull's somewhat elongated lips.

His rain rushed through dark air, each drop a different gloomy shade of green, purple or red. And it was actually wet so that when it fell upon the small audience (The Duke of Queens, Bishop Castle, My Lady Charlotina, and one or two recently arrived, absolutely bemused, time-travellers from the remote past) it soaked their clothes and made them shiver as they stood on the shelf of glassy rock overlooking Werther's Romantic Precipice (below, a waterfall foamed through fierce, black rock.)

'Nature,' exclaimed Werther 'The only verity!'

The Duke of Queens sneezed. He looked about him with a delighted smile, but nobody else had noticed. He coughed to draw their attention, tried to sneeze again, but failed. He looked up into the ghastly sky; fresh waves of black cloud boiled in: there was lightning now, and thunder. The rain became hail. My Lady Charlotina, in a globular dress of pink veined in soft blue, giggled as the little stones fell upon her gilded features with an almost inaudible ringing sound.

But Bishop Castle, in his nodding, crenellated *téte* (from which he derived the latter half of his name and which was twice his own height) turned away, saturnine and bored, plainly noting a comparison between all this and his own entertainment of the previous year which had also involved rain, but with each drop turning into a perfect manikin as it touched the ground There was nothing in his temperament to respond to Werther's rather innocent recreation of a Nature long-since departed from a planet which could be wholly re-modelled at the whim of any one of its inhabitants.

Mistress Christia, ever quick to notice such responses, eager for her present lover not to lose prestige, cried: 'But there is more, is there not, Werther? A finale?'

'I had thought to leave it a little longer . . .'

'No! No! Give us your finale now, my dear!'

'Well, Mistress Christia, if it is for you.' He turned one of his power rings, disseminating the sky, the lightning, the thunder, replacing them with pearly clouds, radiated with golden light through which silvery rain still fell.

'And now,' he murmured, 'I give you Tranquillity, and in Tranquillity – Hope . . .'

A further twist of the ring and a rainbow appeared, bridging the chasm, touching the clouds.

Bishop Castle was impressed by what was an example of elegance rather than spectacle, but he could not resist a minor criticism. 'Is black exactly the shade, do you think?

I should have supposed it expressed your Idea, well, perhaps not perfectly . . .'

'It is perfect for me,' answered Werther a little gracelessly.

'Of course,' said Bishop Castle, regretting his impulse. He drew his bushy red brows together and made a great show of studying the rainbow. 'It stands out so well against the background.'

Emphatically (causing a brief, ironic glint in the eye of the Duke of Queens) Mistress Christia clapped her hands. 'It is a beautiful rainbow, Werther. I am sure it is much more as they used to look.'

'It takes a particularly original kind of imagination to invent such - simplicity.' The Duke of Queens, well-known for a penchant in the direction of vulgarity, fell in with her mood.

'I hope it does more than merely represent.' Satisfied both with his creation and with their responses, Werther could not resist indulging his nature, allowing a tinge of hurt resentment in his tone.

All were tolerant. All responded, even Bishop Castle. There came a chorus of consolation. Mistress Christia reached out and took his thin, white hand, inadvertently touching a power ring.

The rainbow began to topple. It leaned in the sky for a few seconds while Werther watched; his disbelief gradually turning to miserable reconciliation; then, slowly, it fell, shattering against the top of the cliff, showering them with shards of jet.

Mistress Christia's tiny hand fled to the rosebud of her mouth; her round, blue eyes expressed horror already becoming laughter (checked when she noted the look in Werther's dark and tragic orbs). She still gripped his hand; but he slowly withdrew it, kicking moodily at the fragments of the rainbow. The sky was suddenly a clear, soft grey, actually lit, one might have guessed, by the tired rays of the fading star about which the planet continued to circle, and the only clouds were those on Werther's noble brow. He pulled at the peak of his bottle-green cap, he stroked at his long, auburn hair, as if to comfort himself. He sulked.

'Perfect!' praised My Lady Charlotina, refusing to see error.

'You have the knack of making the most of a single symbol, Werther.' The Duke of Queens waved a brocaded

arm in the general direction of the now disseminated scene. 'I envy you your talent, my friend.'

'It takes the product of panting lust, of pulsing sperm and eager ovaries, to offer us such brutal originality!' said Bishop Castle, in reference to Werther's birth (he was the product of sexual union, born of a womb, knowing childhood – a rarity, indeed). 'Bravo!'

'Ah,' sighed Werther, 'how cheerfully you refer to my doom: To be such a creature, when all others came into this world as mature, uncomplicated adults!'

'There was also Jherek Carnelian,' said My Lady Charlotina. Her globular dress bounced as she turned to leave.

'At least he was not born malformed,' said Werther.

'It was the work of a moment to re-form you properly, Werther,' the Duke of Queens reminded him. 'The six arms (was it?) removed, two perfectly fine ones replacing them. After all, it was an unusual exercise on the part of your mother. She did very well, considering it was her first attempt.'

'And her last,' said My Lady Charlotina, managing to have her back to Werther by the time the grin escaped. She snapped her fingers for her air-car. It floated towards her, a great, yellow rocking horse. Its shadow fell across them all.

'It left a scar,' said Werther, 'nonetheless.'

'It would,' said Mistress Christia, kissing him upon his black velvet shoulder.

'A terrible scar.'

'Indeed!' said the Duke of Queens in vague affirmation, his attention wandering. 'Well, thank you for a lovely afternoon, Werther. Come along, you two!' He signed to the time-travellers who claimed to be from the eighty-third millenium and were dressed in primitive transparent 'exoskin' which was not altogether stable and was inclined to writhe and make it seem that they were covered in hundreds of thin, excited snakes. The Duke of Queens had acquired them for his menagerie. Unaware of the difficulties of returning to their own time (temporal travel had, apparently, only just been re-invented in their age) they were inclined to treat the Duke as an eccentric who could be tolerated until it suited them to do otherwise. They smiled condescendingly, winked at each other, and followed him to an air-car in the shape of a cube whose sides were golden mirrors decorated with white and purple flowers. It was for the pleasure of enjoying the pleasure they enjoyed seemingly at his expense, that the

Duke of Queens had brought them with him today. Mistress Christia waved at his car as it disappeared rapidly into the sky.

At last they were all gone, save herself and Werther de Goethe. He had seated himself upon a mossy rock, his shoulders hunched, his features downcast, unable to speak to her when she tried to cheer him.

'Oh, Werther,' she cried at last, 'what would make you happy?'

'Happy?' his voice was a hollow echo of her own. 'Happy?' He made an awkward, dismissive gesture. 'There is no such thing as happiness for such as I!'

'There must be some sort of equivalent, surely?'

'Death, Mistress Christia, is my only consolation!'

'Well, die, my dear! I'll resurrect you in a day or two, and then . . .'

'Though you love me, Mistress Christia - though you know me best you do not understand. I seek the inevitable, the irreconcilable, the unalterable, the inescapable! Our ancestors knew it. They knew Death *without* Resurrection; they knew what it was to be Slave to the Elements Incapable of choosing their own destinies, they had no responsibility for choosing their own actions. They were tossed by tides. They were scattered by storms. They were wiped out by wars, decimated by disease, ravaged by radiation, made homeless by holocausts, lashed by lightnings . . .'

'You could have lashed yourself a little today, surely?'

'But it would have been *my* decision. We have lost what is Random, we have banished the Arbitrary, Mistress Christia. With our power rings and our gene banks we can, if we desire, change the courses of the planets, populate them with any kind of creature we wish, make our old sun burst with fresh energy or fade completely from the firmament. We control All. Nothing controls us!'

'There are our whims, our fancies. There are our *characters*, my moody love.'

'Even those can be altered at will.'

'Except that it is a rare nature which would wish to change itself. Would you change yours? I, for one, would be disconsolate if, say, you decided to be more like the Duke of Queens or the Iron Orchid.'

'Nonetheless, it is *possible*. It would merely be a matter of decision. Nothing is impossible, Mistress Christia. Now do you realise why I should feel unfulfilled?'

'Not really, dear Werther. You can be anything you wish, after all. I am not, as you know, intelligent – it is not my choice to be – but I wonder if a love of Nature could be, in essence, a grandiose love of oneself – with Nature identified, as it were, with one's ego?' She offered this without criticism.

For a moment he showed surprise and seemed to be considering her observation. 'I suppose it could be. Still, that has little to do with what we were discussing. It's true that I can be anything – or, indeed, anyone – I wish. That is *why* I feel unfulfilled!'

'Aha,' she said.

'Oh, how I pine for the pain of the past! Life has no meaning without misery!'

'A common view, then, I gather. But what sort of suffering would suit you best, dear Werther? Enslavement by Esquimaux?' She hesitated, her knowledge of the past being patchier than most people's, 'The beatings with thorns? The barbed-wire trews? The pits of fire?'

'No, no – that is primitive. Psychic, it would have to be. Involving – um – morality.'

'Isn't that some sort of wall-painting?'

A large tear welled and fell. 'The world is too tolerant. The world is too kind. They all – you most of all – *approve* of me! There is nothing I can do which would not amuse you – even if it offended your taste – because there is no danger, nothing at stake. There are no *crimes*, inflamer of my lust. Oh, if I could only *sin*!'

Her perfect forehead wrinkled in the prettiest of frowns. She repeated his words to herself. Then she shrugged, embracing him.

'Tell me what sin is,' she said.

II

In Which Your Auditor Interposes

Our time-travellers, once they have visited the future, are only permitted (owing to the properties of Time itself) brief returns to their present. They can remain for any amount of time in their future, where presumably they can do no real damage to the course of previous events, but to come back at all is difficult; to make a prolonged stay has been proved impossible. Half an hour with a relative or a loved one, a short account to an auditor, such as myself, of life,

say, in the 75th century, a glimpse at an artefact allowed to some interested scientist – these are the best the time-traveller can hope for, once he has made his decision to leap into the mysterious future.

As a consequence our knowledge of the future is sketchy, to say the least: we have no idea of how civilisations will grow up or how they will decline; we do not know why the number of planets in the Solar System seems to vary drastically between, say, half a dozen to almost a hundred; we cannot explain the popularity in a given age for certain fashions striking us as singularly bizarre or perverse; are beliefs which we consider fallacious or superstitious based on an understanding beyond our comprehension?

The stories we hear are often partial, hastily recounted, poorly observed, perhaps misunderstood by the traveller. We cannot question him closely, for he is soon whisked away from us (Time insists upon a certain neatness, to protect her own nature, which is essentially of the practical, ordering sort, and should that nature ever be successfully altered, then we might, in turn, successfully alter the terms of the human condition) and it is almost inevitable that we shall never have another chance of meeting him.

Resultantly, the stories brought to us of the Earth's future assume the character of legends rather than history and tend, therefore, to capture the imagination of artists, for serious scientists need permanent, verifiable evidence with which to work and precious little of that is permitted them (some refuse to believe in the future, save as an abstraction, some believe firmly that returning time-travellers' accounts are accounts of dreams and hallucinations and that they have not actually travelled in time at all!). It is left to the Romancers, childish fellows like myself, to make something of these tales. While I should be delighted to assure you that everything I have set down in this story is based closely on the truth, I am bound to admit that while the outline comes from an account given me by one of our greatest and most famous temporal adventuresses, Miss Una Persson, the conversations and many of the descriptions are of my own invention, intended hopefully to add a little colour to what would otherwise be a somewhat spare, a rather dry, recounting of an incident in the life of Werther de Goethe.

That Werther will exist, only a few entrenched sceptics can doubt. We have heard of him from many sources, usually quite as reliable as the admirable Miss Persson, as

we have heard of other prominent figures of that Age we choose to call 'the End of Time'. If it is this Age which fascinates us more than any other, it is probably because it seems to offer a clue to our race's ultimate destiny.

Moralists make much of this period and show us that on the one hand it describes the pointlessness of human existence or, on the other, the whole point. Romancers are attracted to it for less worthy reasons; they find it colourful, they find its inhabitants glamorous, attractive; their imagination is sparked by the paradoxes, the very ambiguities which exasperated our scientists, by the idea of a people possessing limitless power and using it for nothing but their own amusement, like gods at play. It is pleasure enough for the Romancer to describe a story; to colour it a little, to fill in a few details where they are missing, in the hope that, by entertaining himself, he entertains others.

Of course, the inhabitants at the End of Time are not the creatures of our past legends, not mere representations of our ancestors' hopes and fears, not mere metaphors, like Siegfried or Zeus or Krishna, and this could be why they fascinate us so much. Those of us who have studied this Age (as best it can be studied) feel on friendly terms with the Iron Orchid, with the Duke of Queens, with Lord Jagged of Canaria and the rest, and even believe that we can guess something of their inner lives.

Werther de Goethe, suffering from the *knowledge* of his, by the standards of his own time, unusual entrance into the world, doubtless felt himself apart from his fellows, though there was no objective reason why he should feel it. (I trust the reader will forgive my abandoning any attempt at a clumsy future tense.) In a society where eccentricity is encouraged, where it is celebrated no matter how extreme its realisation, Werther felt, we must assume, uncomfortable: – wishing for peers who would demand some sort of conformity from him. He could not retreat into a repressive past age; it was well-known that it was impossible to remain in the past (the phenomenon had a name at the End of Time: it was called the Morphail Effect), and he had an ordinary awareness of the futility of recreating such an environment for himself – for *he* would have created it; the responsibility would still ultimately be his own. We can only sympathise with the irreconcilable difficulties of leading the life of a gloomy fatalist when one's fate is wholly, decisively, in one's own hands!

Like Jherek Carnelian, whose adventures I have recounted elsewhere, he was particularly liked by his fellows for his vast and often naive enthusiasm for whatever he did. Like Jherek, it was possible for Werther to fall completely in love – with Nature, with an Idea, with Woman (or Man, for that matter).

It seemed to the Duke of Queens (from whom we have it on the excellent authority of Miss Persson herself) that one with such a capacity must love themselves enormously and such love is enviable. The Duke, needless to say, spoke without disapproval when he made this observation: 'To shower such largesse upon the Ego! He kneels before his soul in awe – it is a moody king, in constant need of gifts which must always seem rare!' And what is Sensation, our Moralists might argue, but Seeming Rarity? Last year's gifts regilded.

It might be true that young Werther (in years no more than half a millenium) loved himself too much and that his tragedy was his inability to differentiate between the self-gratifying sensation of the moment and what we would call a lasting and deeply-felt emotion We have a fragment of poetry, written, we are assured, by Werther for Mistress Christia:

At these times, I love you most when you are sleeping;
Your dreams internal, unrealised to the world at large:
And do I hear you weeping?

Most certainly a reflection of Werther's views, scarcely a description, from all that we know of her, of Mistress Christia's essential being.

Have we any reason to doubt her own view of herself? Rather, we should doubt Werther's view of everyone, including himself. Possibly this lack of insight was what made him so thoroughly attractive in his own time – *le Grand Náif*!

And, since we have quoted one, it is fair to quote the other, for happily we have another fragment, from the same source, of Mistress Christia's verse:

To have my body moved by other hands;
Not only those of Man,
But Woman, too!
My Liberty in pawn to those who understand:
That Love, alone, is True.

Surely this displays an irony entirely lacking in Werther's fragment. Affectation is also here, of course, but affectation of Mistress Christia's sort so often hides an equivalently sustained degree of self-knowledge. It is sometimes the case in our own age that the greater the extravagant outer show the greater has been the plunge by the showman into the depths of his private conscience: Consequently, the greater the effort to hide the fact, to give the world not what one is, but what it wants. Mistress Christia chose to reflect with consummate artistry the desires of her lover of the day; to fulfil her ambition as subtly as did she, reveals a person of exceptional perspicacity.

I intrude upon the flow of my tale with these various bits of explanation and speculation only, I hope, to offer credibility for what is to follow – to give a hint at a natural reason for Mistress Christia's peculiar actions and poor Werther's extravagant response. Some time has passed since we left our lovers. For the moment they have separated. We return to Werther . . .

III

In Which Werther Finds a Soul Mate

Werther de Goethe's pile stood on the pinnacle of a black and mile-high crag about which, in the permanent twilight, black vultures swooped and croaked. The rare visitor to Werther's crag could hear the vulture's voices as he approached. 'Never more!' and 'Beware the Ides of March!' and 'Picking a Chicken With You' were three of the least cryptic warnings they had been created to caw.

At the top of the tallest of his thin, dark towers, Werther de Goethe sat in his favourite chair of unpolished quartz, in his favourite posture of miserable introspection, wondering why Mistress Christia had decided to pay a call on My Lady Charlotina at Lake Billy the Kid.

'Why should she wish to stay here, after all?' He cast a suffering eye upon the sighing sea below. 'She is a creature of light – she seeks colour, laughter, warmth, no doubt to try to forget some secret sorrow – she needs all the things I cannot give her. Oh, I am a monster of selfishness!' He allowed himself a small sob. But neither the sob nor the preceding outburst produced the usual satisfaction; self-pity eluded him. He felt adrift, lost, like an explorer without chart or

compass in an unfamiliar land. Manfully, he tried again:

'Mistress Christia! Mistress Christia! Why do you desert me? Without you I am desolate! My pulsatile nerves will sing at your touch only! And yet it must be my doom forever to be betrayed by the very things to which I give my fullest loyalty. Ah, it is hard! It is hard!'

He felt a little better and rose from his chair of unpolished quartz, turning his power ring a fraction so that the wind blew harder through the unglazed windows of the tower and whipped at his hair, blew his cloak about, stung his pale, long face. He raised one jackbooted foot to place it on the low sill and stared through the rain and the wind at the sky like a dreadful, spreading bruise overhead, at the turbulent, howling sea below.

He pursed his lips, twisting his power ring to darken the scene a little more, to bring up the wind's wail and the ocean's roar. He was turning back to his previous preoccupation when he perceived that something alien tossed upon the distant waves; an artefact not of his own design, it intruded upon his careful conception. He peered hard at the object, but it was too far away for him to identify it. Another might have shrugged it aside, but he was painstaking, even prissy, in his need for artistic perfection. Was this some vulgar addition to his scene made, perhaps, by the Duke of Queens in a misguided effort to please him?

He took his parachute (chosen as the only means by which he could leave his tower) from the wall and strapped it on, stepping through the window and tugging at the ripcord as he fell into space. Down he plummetted and the scarlet balloon soon filled with gas, the nacelle opening up beneath him, so that by the time he was hovering some feet above the sombre waves, he was lying comfortably on his chest, staring over the rim of his parachute at the trespassing image he had seen from his tower. What he saw was something resembling a great shell, a shallow boat of mother-of-pearl, floating on that dark and heaving sea.

In astonishment he now realised that the boat was occupied by a slight figure, clad in filmy white, whose face was pale and terrified. It could only be one of his friends, altering their appearance for some whimsical adventure. But which? Then he caught, through the rain, a better glimpse and he heard himself saying:

'A child? A child? Are you a child?'

She could not hear him; perhaps she could not even see

him, having eyes only for the watery walls which threatened to engulf her little boat and carry her down to the land of Casey Jones. How could it be a child? He rubbed his eyes. He must be projecting his hopes – but there, that movement, that whimper! It *was* a child! Without doubt!

He watched, open-mouthed, as she was flung this way and that by the elements - *his* elements She was powerless: actually powerless! He relished her terror; he envied her her fear. Where had she come from? Save for himself and Jherek Carnelian there had not been a child on the planet for thousands upon thousands of years.

He leaned further out, studying her smooth skin, her lovely rounded limbs. Her eyes were tight shut now as the waves crashed upon her fragile craft; her delicate fingers, unstrong, courageous, clung hard to the side! her white dress was wet, outlining her new-formed breasts; water poured from her long, auburn hair. She panted in delicious impotence.

'It *is* a child!' Werther exclaimed. 'A sweet, frightened child!'

And in his excitement he toppled from his parachute with an astonished yell, and landed with a crash, which winded him, in the sea-shell boat beside the girl. She opened her eyes as he turned his head to apologise. Plainly she had not been aware of his presence overhead. For a moment he could not speak, though his lips moved. But she screamed.

'My dear . . .' The words were thin and high and they faded into the wind. He struggled to raise himself on his elbows. 'I apologise . . .'

She screamed again. She crept as far away from him as possible. Still she clung to her flimsy boat's side as the waves played with it: a thoughtless giant with too delicate a toy; inevitably, it must shatter. He waved his hand to indicate his parachute, but it had already been borne away. His cloak was caught by the wind and wrapped itself around his arm; he struggled to free himself and became further entangled; he heard a new scream and then some demoralised whimpering.

'I will save you!' he shouted, by way of reassurance, but his voice was muffled even in his own ears. It was answered by a further pathetic shriek. As the cloak was saturated it became increasingly difficult for him to escape its folds. He lost his temper and was deeper enmeshed. He tore at the thing. He freed his head.

'I am not your enemy, tender one, but your saviour,' he said. It was obvious that she could not hear him. With an impatient gesture he flung off his cloak at last and twisted a power ring. The volume of noise was immediately reduced. Another twist, and the waves became calmer. She stared at him in wonder.

'Did you do that?' she asked.

'Of course. It is my scene, you see. But how you came to enter it, I do not know!'

'You are a wizard, then?' she said.

'Not at all. I have no interest in sport.' He clapped his hands and his parachute re-appeared, perhaps a trifle reluctantly as if it had enjoyed its brief independence, and drifted down until it was level with the boat. Werther lightened the sky. He could not bring himself, however, to dismiss the rain, but he let a little sun shine through it.

'There,' he said. 'The storm has passed, eh? Did you like your experience?'

'It was horrifying! I was so afraid. I thought I would drown.'

'Yes? And did you like it?'

She was puzzled, unable to answer as he helped her aboard the nacelle and ordered the parachute home.

'You *are* a wizard!' she said. She did not seem disappointed. He did not quiz her as to her meaning. For the moment, if not for always, he was prepared to let her identify him however she wished.

'You are actually a child?' he asked hesitantly. 'I do not mean to be insulting. A time-traveller, perhaps? Or from another planet?'

'Oh, no. I am an orphan. My father and mother are now dead. I was born on Earth some fourteen years ago.' She looked in mild dismay over the side of the craft as they were whisked swiftly upward. '*They* were time-travellers. We made our home in a forgotten menagerie underground, but it was pleasant. My parents feared recapture, you see. Food still grew in the menagerie. There were books, too, and they taught me to read and there were other records through which they were able to present me with a reasonable education. I am not illiterate. I know the world. I was taught to fear wizards.'

'Ah,' he crooned, 'the world! But you are not a part of it, just as I am not a part.'

The parachute reached the window and, at his indication,

she stepped gingerly from it to the tower. The parachute folded itself and placed itself upon the wall. Werther said: 'You will want food, then? I will create whatever you wish!'

'Fairy food will not fill mortal stomachs, sir,' she told him.

'You are beautiful,' he said. 'Regard me as your mentor, as your new father. I will teach you what this world is really like. Will you oblige me, at least, by trying the food?'

'I will.' She looked about her with a mixture of curiosity and suspicion. 'You lead a spartan life.' She noticed a cabinet. 'Books? You read, then?'

'In transcription,' he admitted. 'I listen. My enthusiasm is for Ivan Turgiditi, who created the Novel of Discomfort and remained its greatest practitioner. In, I believe, the 900th (though they could be spurious, invented, I have heard) . . .'

'Oh, no, no! I have read Turgiditi.' She blushed. 'In the original. *Wet Socks* – four hours of discomfort, every second brought to life, and in less than a thousand pages!'

'My favourite,' he told her, his expression softening still more into besotted wonderment. 'I can scarcely believe – in this Age – one such as you! Innocent of device. Uncorrupted! Pure!'

She frowned. 'My parents taught me well, sir.I am not . . .'

'You cannot know! And dead, you say? Dead! If only I could have witnessed – but no, I am insensitive. Forgive me. I mentioned food.'

'I am not really hungry.'

'Later, then. That I should have so recently mourned such things as lacking in this world. I was blind. I did not look. Tell me everything Whose was the menagerie?'

'It belonged to one of the lords of this planet. My mother was from a period she called the October Century, but recently recovered from a series of interplanetary wars and fresh and optimistic in its rediscoveries of ancestral technologies. She was chosen to be the first into the future. She was captured upon her arrival and imprisoned by a wizard like yourself.'

'The word means little. But continue.'

'She said that she used the word because it had meaning for her and she had no other short description. My father came from a time known as the Preliminary Structure, where human kind was rare and machines proliferated. He never mentioned the nature of the transgression he made from the social code of his day, but as a result of it he was banished to this world. He, too, was captured for the same menagerie

and there he met my mother. They lived originally, of course, in separate cages, where their normal environments were recreated for them. But the owner of the menagerie became bored, I think, and abandoned interest in his collection . . .'

'I have often remarked that people who cannot look after their collections have no business keeping them,' said Werther. 'Please continue, my dear child.' He reached out and patted her hand.

'One day he went away and they never saw him again. It took them some time to realise that he was not returning. Slowly the more delicate creatures, whose environments required special attention, died.'

'No one came to resurrect them?'

'No one. Eventually my mother and father were the only ones left. They made what they could of their existence, too wary to enter the outer world in case they should be recaptured, and, to their astonishment, conceived me. They had heard that people from different historical periods could not produce children.'

'I have heard the same.'

'Well, then, I was a fluke. They were determined to give me as good an upbringing as they could and to prepare me for the dangers of your world.'

'Oh, they were right! For one so innocent, there are many dangers. I will protect you, never fear.'

'You are kind.' She hesitated. 'I was not told by my parents that such as you existed.'

'I am the only one.'

'I see. My parents died in the course of this past year, first my father, then my mother (of a broken heart, I believe) I buried my mother and at first made an attempt to live the life we had always led, but I felt the lack of company and decided to explore the world, for it seemed to me I, too, could grow old and die before I had experienced anything!'

'Grow old,' mouthed Werther rhapsodically, 'and die!'

'I set out a month or so ago and was disappointed to discover the absence of ogres, of malevolent creatures of any sort – and the wonders I witnessed, while a trifle bewildering, did not compare with those I had imagined I would find. I had fully expected to be snatched up for a menagerie by now, but nobody has shown interest, even when they have seen me.'

'Few follow the menagerie fad, at present.' He nodded.

'They would not have known you for what you were. Only I could recognise you. Oh, how lucky I am. And how lucky *you* are, my dear, to have met me when you did. You see, I, too, am a child of the womb. I, too, made my own hard way through the utereal gloom to breathe the air, to find the light of this faded, this senile globe. Of all those you could have met, you have met the only one who understands you, who is likely to share your passions, to relish your education. We are soul mates, child!'

He stood up and put a tender arm about her young shoulders.

'You have a new mother, a new father now! His name is Werther!'

IV

In Which Werther Finds Sin At Last

Her name was Catherine Lily Marguerite Natasha Dolores Beatrice Machineshop-Seven Flambeau Gratitude (the last two names but one being her father's and her mother's respectively).

Werther de Goethe continued to talk to her for some hours. Indeed, he became quite carried away as he described all the exciting things they would do, how they would live lives of the purest poetry and simplicity from now on, the quiet and tranquil places they would visit, the manner in which her education would be supplemented, and he was glad to note, he thought, her wariness dissipating, her attitude warming to him.

'I will devote myself entirely to your happiness,' he informed her, and then, noticing that she was fast asleep, he smiled tenderly: 'Poor child. I am a worm of thoughtlessness. She is exhausted.'

He rose from his chair of unpolished quartz and strode to where she lay curled upon the iguana-skin rug; stooping, he placed his hands under her warm-smelling, her yielding body, and somewhat awkwardly lifted her. In her sleep she uttered a tiny moan, her cherry lips parted and her newly budded breasts rose and fell rapidly against his chest once or twice until she sank back into a deeper slumber.

He staggered, panting with the effort, to another part of the tower and then he lowered her with a sigh to the floor. He realised that he had not prepared a proper bedroom for her.

Fingering his chin, he inspected the dank stones, the cold

obsidian which had suited his mood so well for so long and now seemed singularly offensive. Then he smiled.

'She must have beauty,' he said, 'and it must be subtle. It must be calm.'

An inspiration, a movement of a power ring, and the walls were covered with thick carpets embroidered with scenes from his own old book of fairy tales. He remembered how he had listened to the book over and over again – his only consolation in the lonely days of his extreme youth.

Here, Man Shelley, a famous harmonican, ventured into Odeon (a version of Hell) in order to be re-united with his favourite three-headed dog Omnibus. The picture showed him with his harmonica (or 'harp') playing 'Blues for a Nightingale' – a famous lost piece. There, Casablanca Bogard, with his single eye, in the middle of his forehead, wielded his magic spade, Sam, in his epic fight with that ferocious bird, the Malted Falcon, to save his love, the Acrilan Queen, from the power of Big Sleepy (a dwarf who had turned himself into a giant) and Mutinous Caine, who had been cast out of Hollywood (or paradise) for the killing of his sister, the Blue Angel.

Such scenes were surely the very stuff to stir the romantic, delicate imagination of this lovely child, just as his had been stirred when – he felt the *frisson* – he had been her age. He glowed. His substance was suffused with delicious compassion for them both as he recalled, also, the torments of his own adolescence.

That she should be suffering as he had suffered filled him with the pleasure all must feel when a fellow spirit is recognised, and at the same time he was touched by her plight, determined that she should not know the anguish of his earliest years. Once, long ago, Werther had courted Jherek Carnelian, admiring him for his fortitude, knowing that locked in Jherek's head were the memories of bewilderment, misery and despair which would echo his own; but Jherek, pampered progeny of that most artificial of all creatures, the Iron Orchid, had been unable to recount any suitable experiences at all, had, whilst cheerfully eager to please Werther, recalled nothing but pleasurable times, had reluctantly admitted, at last, to the possession of the happiest of childhoods. That was when Werther had concluded that Jherek Carnelian had no soul worth speaking of and he had never altered his opinion (now he secretly doubted Jherek's origins and sometimes believed that Jherek merely

pretended to have been a child - merely one more of his boring and superficial affectations).

Next, a bed - a soft, downy, bed, spread with sheets of silver silk, with posts of ivory and hangings of precious perspex, antique and yellowed, and on the floor the finely-tanned skins of albino hamsters and marmalade cats.

Werther added gorgeous lavs of intricately patterned red and blue ceramic, their bowls filled with living flowers: with whispering toadflax, dragonsnaps, goldilocks and shanghai lilies, with blooming scarlet margravines (his adopted daughter's name-flower, as he knew to his pride), with soda-purple poppies and tea-green roses, with iodine and cerise and crimson hanging johnny, with golden cynthia and sky-blue true-lips, calomine and creeping larrikin, until the room was saturated with their intoxicating scents.

Placing a few bunches of hitler's balls in the corners near the ceiling, a toy fish-tank (capable of firing real fish), which he remembered owning as a boy, under the window, a trunk (it could be opened by pressing the navel) filled with clothes near the bed, a full set of bricks and two bats against the wall close to the doorway, he was able, at last, to view the room with some satisfaction.

Obviously, he told himself, she would make certain changes according to her own tastes. That was why he had shown such restraint. He imagined her naive delight when she wakened in the morning. And he must be sure to produce days and nights of regular duration, because at her age routine was the main thing a child needed. There was nothing like the certainty of a consistently glorious sunrise! This reminded him to make an alteration to a power ring on his left hand, to spread upon the black cushion of the sky crescent moons and stars and starlets in profusion. Bending carefully, he picked up the vibrant youth of her body and lowered her to the bed, drawing the silver sheets up to her vestal chin. Chastely he touched lips to her forehead and crept from the room, fashioning a leafy door behind him, hesitating for a moment, unable to define the mood in which he found himself. A rare smile illumined features set so long in lines of gloom. Returning to his own quarters, he murmured:

'I believe it is Contentment!'

A month swooned by. Werther lavished every moment

of his time upon his new charge. He thought of nothing but her youthful satisfactions. He encouraged her in joy, in idealism, in a love of Nature. Gone were his blizzards, his rocky spires, his bleak wastes and his moody forests, to be replaced with gentle landscapes of green hills and merry, tinkling rivers, sunny glades in copses of poplars, rhododendrons, redwoods, laburnums, banyans and good old amiable oaks. When they went on a picnic large-eyed cows and playful gorillas would come and nibble scraps of food from Catherine Gratitude's palm. And when it was day, the sun always shone and the sky was always blue, and if there were clouds, they were high, hesitant puffs of whiteness and soon gone.

He found her books so that she might read. There was Turgiditi and Uto, Pett Ridge and Zakka, Pyat Sink – all the ancients. Sometimes he asked her to read to him, for the luxury of dispensing with his usual translators. She had been fascinated by a picture of a typewriter she had seen in a record, so he fashioned an air-car in the likeness of one, and they travelled the world in it, looking at scenes created by Werther's peers.

'Oh, Werther,' she said one day, 'you are so good to me. Now that I realise the misery which might have been mine (as well as the life I was missing underground) I love you more and more.'

'And I love you more and more,' he replied, his head a-swim. And for a moment he felt a pang of guilt at having forgotten Mistress Christia so easily. He had not seen her since Catherine had come to him and he guessed that she was sulking somewhere. He prayed that she would not decide to take vengeance on him.

They went to see Jherek Carnelian's famous 'London, 1896' and Werther manfully hid his displeasure at her admiration for his rival's buildings of white marble, gold and sparkling quartz. He showed her his own abandoned tomb, which he privately considered in better taste, but it was plain that it did not give her the same satisfaction.

They saw the Duke of Queens' latest, 'Ladies and Swans', but not for long, for Werther considered it unsuitable. Later they paid a visit to Lord Jagged of Canaria's somewhat abstract 'War and Peace in Two Dimensions' and Werther thought it too stark to please the girl, judging the experiment 'successful', but Catherine laughed with glee as she touched the living figures and found that somehow it was

true – Lord Jagged had given them length and breadth but not a scrap of width – when they turned aside, they disappeared.

It was on one of these expeditions, to Bishop Castle's 'A Million Angry Wrens' (an attempt in the recently revised art of Aesthetic Loudness), that they encountered Lord Mongrove, a particular confidante of Werther's until they had quarrelled over the method of suicide adopted by the natives of Uranus during the period of the Great Sodium Breather By now they would, if Werther had not found a new obsession, have patched up their differences and Werther felt a pang of guilt for having forgotten the one person on this planet with whom he had, after all, shared something in common.

In his familiar dark green robes, with his leonine head hunched between his massive shoulders, the giant, apparently disdaining an air-carriage, was riding home upon the back of a monstrous snail.

The first thing they saw, from above, was its shining trail over the azure rocks of some abandoned, half-created scene of Argonheart Po's (who believed that nothing was worth making unless it tasted delicious and could be eaten and digested) It was Catherine who saw the snail itself first and exclaimed at the size of the man who occupied the swaying howdah on its back.

'He must be ten feet tall, Werther!'

And Werther, knowing whom she meant, made their typewriter descend, crying:

'Mongrove! My old friend!'

Mongrove, however, was sulking He had chosen not to forget whatever insult it had been which Werther had levelled at him when they had last met. 'What? Is it Werther? Bring freshly sharpened dirks for the flesh between my shoulder blades? It is that Cold Betrayer himself, whom I befriended when a bare boy, pretending carelessness, feigning insouciance, as if he cannot remember, with relish, the exact degree of bitterness of the poisoned wine he fed me when we parted. Faster, steed! Bear me away from Treachery! Let me fly from further Insult! No more shall I suffer at the hands of Calumny!' And, with his long, jewelled stick, he beat upon the shell of his mollusculoid mount. The beast's horns waved agitatedly for a moment,

but it did not really seem capable of any greater speed. In good-humoured puzzlement, it turned its slimy head towards its master.

'Forgive me, Mongrove! I take back all I said,' announced Werther, unable to recall a single sour syllable of the exchange. 'Tell me why you are abroad. It is rare for you to leave your doomy dome.'

'I am making my way to the Ball,' said Lord Mongrove, 'which is shortly to be held by My Lady Charlotina. Doubtless I have been invited to act as a butt for their malice and their gossip, but I go in good faith.'

'A Ball? I know nothing of it.'

Mongrove's countenance brightened a trifle. 'You have not been invited? Ah!'

'I wonder . . . But, no – My Lady Charlotina shows unsuspected sensitivity. She knows that I now have responsibilities – to my little Ward, here. To Catherine – to my Kate.'

'The child?'

'Yes, to my child. I am privileged to be her protector. Fate favours me as her new father. This is she. Is she not lovely? Is she not innocent?'

Lord Mongrove raised his great head and looked at the slender girl beside Werther. He shook his huge head as if in pity for her.

'Be careful, my dear,' he said. 'To be befriended by de Goethe is to be embraced by a viper!'

She did not understand Mongrove; questioningly, she looked up at Werther. 'What does he mean?'

Werther was shocked. He clapped his hands to her pretty ears.

'Listen no more! I regret the overture. The movement, Lord Mongrove, shall remain unresolved. Farewell, spurner of good-intent. I had never guessed before the level of your cynicism. Such an accusation! Goodbye, for ever, most malevolent of mortals, despiser of altruism, hater of love! She shall know me no longer!'

'You have known yourself not at all,' snapped Mongrove spitefully, but it was unlikely that Werther, already speeding skyward, heard the remark.

And thus it was with particular and unusual graciousness that Werther greeted My Lady Charlotina when, a little later, they came upon her.

She was wearing the russett ears and eyes of a fox, riding her yellow rocking horse through the patch of orange sky

left over from her own turbulent 'Death of Neptune'. She waved to them. 'Cock-a-loodle-do!'

'My dear Lady Charlotina. What a pleasure it is to see you. Your beauty continues to rival Nature's mightiest miracles.'

It is with such unwonted effusion that one will greet a person, who has not hitherto aroused our feelings, when we are in a position to compare them against another, closer, acquaintance who had momentarily earned our contempt or anger.

She seemed taken aback, but received the compliment equably enough.

'Dear Werther! And is this that rarity, the girl-child I have heard so much about and whom, in your goodness, you have taken under your wing? I could not believe it! A child! And how lucky she is to find a father in yourself – of all our number the one best suited to look after her.'

It might also be said that Werther preened himself beneath the golden shower of her benediction, and if he detected no irony in her tone, perhaps it was because he still smarted from Mongrove's dash of vitriol.

'I have been chosen, it seems,' he said modestly, 'to lead this waif through the traps and illusions of our weary world. The burden I shoulder is not light . . .'

'Valiant Werther!'

'. . . but it is shouldered willingly. I am devoting my life to her upbringing, to her peace of mind.' He placed a bloodless hand upon her auburn locks and, winsomely, she shook his other one.

'You are tranquil, my dear?' asked Lady Charlotina kindly, arranging her blue skirts over the saddle of her rocking horse. 'You have no doubts?'

'At first I had,' admitted the sweet child, 'but gradually I learned to trust my new father. Now I would trust him in anything!'

'Ah,' sighed My Lady Charlotina, 'trust!'

'Trust,' said Werther. 'It grows in me, too. You encourage me, charming Charlotina, for a short time ago I believed myself doubted by all.'

'Is it possible? When you are evidently so reconciled – so – happy!'

'And I am happy, also, now that I have Werther,' carolled the commendable Catherine.

'Exquisite!' breathed My Lady Charlotina. 'And you will, of course, both come to my Ball.'

'I am not sure . . .' began Werther, 'perhaps Catherine is too young . . .'

But she raised her tawny hands 'It is your duty to come. To show us all that simple hearts are the happiest.'

'Possibly . . .'

'You must. The world must have examples, Werther, if it is to follow your Way.'

Werther lowered his eyes shyly. 'I am honoured,' he said. 'We accept.'

'Splendid! Then come soon. Come now, if you like. A few arrangements, and the Ball begins.'

'Thank you,' said Werther, 'but I think it best if we return to my castle for a little while.' He caressed his ward's fine, long tresses. 'For it will be Catherine's first Ball and she must choose her gown.'

And he beamed down upon his radiant protégée as she clapped her hands in joy.

My Lady Charlotina's Ball must have been at least a mile in circumference, set against the soft tones of a summer twilight, red-gold and transparent so that, as one approached, the guests who had already arrived could be seen standing upon the inner wall, clad in creations extravagant even at the End of Time.

The Ball itself was inclined to roll a little, but those inside it were undisturbed; their footing was firm, thanks to My Lady Charlotina's artistry The Ball was entered by means of a number of sphincterish openings, placed more or less at random in its outer wall. At the very centre of the Ball, on a floating platform, sat an orchestra comprising the choicest musicians, out of a myriad ages and planets, from My Lady's great menagerie (she specialised, currently, in artists).

When Werther de Goethe, a green-gowned Catherine Gratitude upon his blue velvet arm, arrived, the orchestra was playing some primitive figure of My Lady Charlotina's own composition It was called, she claimed as she welcomed them, 'On the Theme of Childhood', but doubtless she thought to please them, for Werther believed he had heard it before, under a different title.

Many of the guests had already arrived and were standing

in small groups chatting to each other. Werther greeted an old friend Li Pao, of the 27th century, and such a kill-joy that he had never been wanted for a menagerie. While he was forever criticising their behaviour, he never missed a party. Next to him stood the Iron Orchid, mother of Jherek Carnelian, who was not present. In contrast to Li Pao's faded blue overalls, she wore rags of red, yellow and mauve, thousands of sparkling bracelets, anklets and necklaces, a head-dress of woven peacock's wings, slippers which were moles and whose beady eyes looked up from the floor.

'What do you mean – waste?' she was saying to Li Pao. 'What else could we do with the energy of the universe? If our sun burns out, we create another. Doesn't that make us conservatives? Or is it preservatives?'

'Good evening, Werther,' said Li Pao in some relief. He bowed politely to the girl. 'Good evening, miss.'

'Miss?' said the Iron Orchid. 'What?'

'Gratitude.'

'For whom?'

'This is Catherine Gratitude, my ward,' said Werther, and the Iron Orchid let forth a peal of luscious laughter.

'The girl-bride, eh?'

'Not at all,' said Werther. 'How is Jherek?'

'Lost, I fear, in Time. We have seen nothing of him recently. He still pursues his paramour. Some say you copy him, Werther.'

He knew her bantering tone of old and took the remark in good part. 'His is a mere affectation,' he said. 'Mine is Reality.'

'You were always one to make that distinction, Werther,' she said 'And I will never understand the difference!'

'I find your concern for Miss Gratitude's upbringing most worthy,' said Li Pao somewhat unctuously. 'If there is any way I can help. My knowledge of twenties' politics, for instance, is considered unmatched – particularly, of course, where the 26th and 27th centuries are concerned . . .'

'You are kind,' said Werther, unsure how to take an offer which seemed to him overeager and not entirely selfless.

Gaf the Horse in Tears, whose clothes were real flame, flickered towards them, the light from his burning, unstable face almost blinding Werther. Catherine Gratitude shrank from him as he reached out a hand to touch her, but her expression changed as she realised that he was not at all hot – rather, there was something almost chilly about the sensa-

tion on her shoulder. Werther did his best to smile. 'Good evening, Gaf.'

'She is a dream!' said Gaf. 'I know it, because only I have such a wonderful imagination. Did I create her, Werther?'

'You jest.'

'Ho, ho! Serious old Werther.' Gaf kissed him, bowed to the child, and moved away, his body erupting in all directions as he laughed the more. 'Literal, literal Werther!'

'He is a boor,' Werther told his charge. 'Ignore him.'

'I thought him sweet,' she said.

'You have much to learn, my dear.'

The music filled the Ball and some of the guests left the floor to dance, hanging in the air around the orchestra, darting streamers of coloured energy in order to weave complex patterns as they moved.

'They are very beautiful,' said Catherine Gratitude. 'May we dance soon, Werther?'

'If you wish. I am not much given to such pastimes as a rule.'

'But tonight?'

He smiled. 'I can refuse you nothing, child.'

She hugged his arm and her girlish laughter filled his heart with warmth.

'Perhaps you should have made yourself a child before, Werther?' suggested the Duke of Queens, drifting away from the dance and leaving a trail of green fire behind him. He was clad all in soft metal which reflected the colours in the Ball and created other colours in turn. 'You are a perfect father. Your métier.'

'It would not have been the same, Duke of Queens.'

'As you say.' His darkly handsome face bore its usual expression of benign amusement. 'I am the Duke of Queens, child. It is an honour.' He bowed, his metal booming.

'Your friends are wonderful,' said Catherine Gratitude. 'Not at all what I expected.'

'Be wary of them,' murmured Werther. 'They have no conscience.'

'Conscience? What is that?'

Werther touched a ring and led her up into the air of the Ball. 'I am your conscience, for the moment, Catherine. You shall learn in time.'

Lord Jagged of Canaria, his face almost hidden by one of his high, quilted collars, floated in their direction.

'Werther, my boy! This must be your daughter. Oh!

Sweeter than honey! Softer than petals! I have heard so much – but the praise was not enough! You must have poetry written about you. Music composed for you. Tales must be spun with you as the heroine.' And Lord Jagged made a deep and elaborate bow, his long sleeves sweeping the air below his feet. Next, he addressed Werther:

'Tell me, Werther, have you seen Mistress Christia? Everyone else is here, but not she.'

'I have looked for the Everlasting Concubine without success.' Werther told him.

'She should arrive soon. In a moment My Lady Charlotina announces the beginning of the masquerade – and Mistress Christia loves the masquerade.'

'I suspect she pines,' said Werther.

'Why so?'

'She loved me, you know.'

'Aha! Perhaps you are right. But I interrupt your dance. Forgive me.'

And Lord Jagged of Canaria floated, stately and beautiful, towards the floor.

'Mistress Christia?' said Catherine. 'Is she your Lost Love?'

'A wonderful woman,' said Werther. 'But my first duty is to you. Regretfully I could not pursue her, as I think she wanted me to do.'

'Have I come between you?'

'Of course not. Of course not. That was infatuation – this is a sacred duty.'

And Werther showed her how to dance – how to notice a gap in a pattern which might be filled by the movements from her body. Because it was a special occasion he had given her her very own power ring – only a small one, but she was proud of it, and she gasped so prettily at the colours her train made that Werther's fears that his gift might corrupt her precious innocence were plainly unfounded. It was then that he realised with a shock how deeply he had fallen in love with her.

At the realisation, he made an excuse, leaving her to dance with first Sweet Orb Mace, feminine tonight, with a latticed face, and then with O'Kala Incarnadine who, with his usual preference for the bodies of beasts, was currently a bear. Although he felt a pang as he watched her stroke O'Kala's ruddy fur, he could not bring himself just then to interfere. His immediate desire was to leave the Ball, but to do that

would be to disappoint his ward, to raise questions he would not wish to answer. After a while he began to feel a certain satisfaction from his suffering and remained, miserably, on the floor while Catherine danced on and on.

And then My Lady Charlotina had stopped the orchestra and stood on the platform calling for their attention.

'It is time for the masquerade. You all know the theme, I hope.' She paused, smiling. 'All, save Werther and Catherine. When the music begins again, please reveal your creations of the evening.'

Werther frowned, wondering her reasons for not revealing the theme of the masquerade to him. She was still smiling at him as she drifted towards him and settled beside him on the floor.

'You seem sad, Werther. Why so? I thought you at one with yourself at last. Wait. My surprise will flatter you, I'm sure!'

The music began again. The Ball was filled with laughter – and there was the theme of the masquerade!

Werther cried out in anguish. He dashed upward through the gleeful throng, seeing each face as a mockery, trying to reach the side of his girl-child before she could realise the dreadful truth.

'Catherine! Catherine!'

He flew to her. She was bewildered as he folded her in his arms.

'Oh, they are monsters of insincerity! Oh, they are grotesque in their aping of all that is simple, all that is pure!' he cried.

He glared about him at the other guests. My Lady Charlotina had chosen 'Childhood' as her general theme. Sweet Orb Mace had changed himself into a gigantic single sperm, his own face still visible at the glistening tail; the Iron Orchid had become a monstrous new-born baby with a red and bawling face which still owed more to Paint than to Nature; the Duke of Queens, true to character, was three-year-old Siamese twins (both the faces were his own, softened); even Lord Mongrove had deigned to become an egg.

'What ith it, Werther?' lisped My Lady Charlotina at his feet, her brown curls bobbing as she waved her lollipop in the general direction of the other guests. 'Doeth it not pleathe you?'

'Ugh! This is agony! A parody of everything I hold most perfect!'

'But, Werther . . .'

'What is wrong, dear Werther?' begged Catherine. 'It is only a masquerade.'

'Can you not see? It is you – everything you and I mean – that they mock. No – it is best that you do not see. Come, Catherine. They are insane; they revile all that is sacred!' And he bore her bodily towards the wall, rushing through the nearest doorway and out into the darkened sky.

He left his typewriter behind, so great was his haste to be gone from that terrible scene. He fled with her willy-nilly through the air, through daylight, through pitchy night. He fled until he came to his own tower, flanked now by green lawns and rolling turf, surrounded by song-birds, swamped in sunshine. And he hated it – landscape, larks and light - all were hateful.

He flew through the window and found his room full of comforts – of cushions and carpets and heady perfume – and with a gesture he removed them Their particles hung gleaming in the sun's beams for a moment But the sun, too, was hateful. He blacked it out and night swam into that bare chamber. And all the while, in amazement, Catherine Gratitude looked on, her lips forming the question, but never uttering it. At length, tentatively, she touched his arm.

'Werther?'

His hands flew to his head. He roared in his mindless pain.

'Oh, Werther!'

'Ah! They destroy me! They destroy my ideals!'

He was weeping when he turned to bury his face in her hair.

'Werther!' She kissed his cold cheek. She stroked his shaking back. And she led him from the ruins of his room and down the passage to her own apartment.

'Why should I strive to set up standards,' he sobbed, 'when all about me they seek to pull them down. It would be better to be a villain!'

But he was quiescent; he allowed himself to be seated upon her bed; he felt suddenly drained. He sighed. 'They hate innocence. They would see it gone forever from this globe.'

She gripped his hand. She stroked it. 'No, Werther. They meant no harm. I saw no harm.'

'They would corrupt you. I must keep you safe.'

Her lips touched his and his body came alive again. Her fingers touched his skin. He gasped.

'I must keep you safe.'

In a dream, he took her in his arms. Her lips parted, their tongues met. Her young breasts pressed against him – and for perhaps the first time in his life Werther understood the meaning of physical joy. His blood began to dance to the rhythm of a sprightlier heart. And why should he not take what they would take in his position? He placed a hand upon a pulsing thigh. If cynicism called the tune, then he would show them he could pace as pretty a measure as any. His kisses became passionate, and passionately they were returned.

'Catherine!'

A motion of a power ring and their clothes were gone, the bed hangings drawn.

And your auditor not being of that modern school which salaciously seeks to share the secrets of others' passions (secrets familiar, one might add, to the great majority of us) retires from this scene.

But when he woke the next morning and turned on the sun, Werther looked down at the lovely child beside him, her auburn hair spread across the pillows, her little breasts rising and falling in tranquil sleep, and he realised that he had used his reaction to the masquerade to betray his trust A madness had filled him; he had raised an evil wind and his responsibility had been borne off by it, taking Innocence and Purity, never to return. His lust had lost him everything.

Tears reared in his tormented eyes and ran cold upon his heated cheeks. 'Mongrove was perceptive indeed,' he murmured. 'To be befriended by Werther is to be embraced by a viper. She can never trust me – anyone – again. I have lost my right to offer her protection. I have stolen her childhood.'

And he got up from the bed, from the scene of that most profound of crimes, and he ran from the room and went to sit in his old chair of unpolished quartz, staring listlessly through the window at the paradise he had created outside. It accused him; it reminded him of his high ideals. He was astonished by the consequences of his actions: he had turned his paradise to hell.

A great groan reverberated in his chest. 'Oh, now I know what sin is!' he said. 'And what terrible tribute it exacts from the one who tastes it!'

And he sank almost luxuriously into the deepest gloom he had ever known.

V

In Which Werther Finds Redemption Of Sorts

He avoided Catherine Gratitude all that day, even when he heard her calling his name, for if the landscape could fill him with such agony, what would he feel under the startled inquisition of her gaze? He erected himself a heavy dungeon door so that she could not get in, and, as he sat contemplating his poisoned paradise, he saw her once, walking on a hill he had made for her. She seemed unchanged, of course, but he knew in his heart how she must be shivering with the chill of lost innocence. That it should have been himself, of all men, who had introduced her so young to the tainted joys of carnal love! Another deep sigh and he buried his fists savagely into his eyes.

'Catherine! Catherine! I am a thief, an assassin, a despoiler of souls. The name of Werther de Goethe becomes a synonym for Treachery!'

It was not until the next morning that he thought himself able to admit her to his room, to submit himself to a judgement which he knew would be worse for not being spoken. Even when she did enter, his shifty eye would not focus on her for long. He looked for some outward sign of her experience, somewhat surprised that he could detect none.

He glared at the floor, knowing his words to be inadequate. 'I am sorry,' he said.

'For leaving the Ball, darling Werther! The epilogue was infinitely sweeter.'

'Don't!' He put his hands to his ears. 'I cannot undo what I have done, my child, but I can try to make amends. Evidently you must not stay here with me. You need suffer nothing further on that score. For myself, I must contemplate an eternity of loneliness. It is the least of the prices I must pay. But Mongrove would be kind to you, I am sure.' He looked at her. It seemed that she had grown older. Her bloom was fading now that it had been touched by the icy fingers of that most sinister, most insinuating, of libertines,

called Death. 'Oh,' he sobbed, 'how haughty was I in my pride! How I congratulated myself on my high-mindedness. Now I am proved the lowliest of all my kind!'

'I really cannot follow you, Werther dear,' she said. 'Your behaviour is rather odd today, you know. Your words mean very little to me.'

'Of course they mean little,' he said. 'You are unworldly, child. How can you anticipate . . . ah, ah . . .' and he hid his face in his hands.

'Werther, please cheer up. I have heard of *le petit mal*, but this seems to be going on for a somewhat longer time. I am still puzzled . . .'

'I cannot, as yet,' he said, speaking with some difficulty through his palms, 'bring myself to describe in cold words the enormity of the crime I have committed against your spirit – against your childhood. I had known that you would – eventually – wish to experience the joys of true love – but I had hoped to prepare your soul for what was to come – so that when it happened it would be beautiful.'

'But it *was* beautiful, Werther.'

He found himself experiencing a highly inappropriate impatience with her failure to understand her doom.

'It was not the right *kind* of beauty,' he explained.

'There are certain correct kinds for certain times?' she asked. 'You are sad because we have offended some social code?'

'There is no such thing in this world, Catherine – but you, child, could have known a code. Something I never had when I was your age – something I wanted for you. One day you will realise what I mean.' He leaned forward, his voice thrilling, his eye hot and hard, 'And if you do not hate me now, Catherine, oh, you will hate me then. Yes! You will hate me then.'

Her answering laughter was unaffected, unstrained. 'This is silly, Werther. I have rarely had a nicer experience.'

He turned aside, raising his hands as if to ward off blows. 'Your words are darts – each one draws blood in my conscience.' He sank back into his chair.

Still laughing, she began to stroke his limp hand. He drew it away from her. 'Ah, see! I have made you lascivious. I have introduced you to the drug called lust!'

'Well, perhaps to an aspect of it!'

Some change in her tone began to impinge on Werther, though he was still deep-trapped in the glue of his guilt. He

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raised his head, his expression bemused, refusing to believe the import of her words.

'A wonderful aspect,' she said. And she licked his ear.

He shuddered. He frowned. He tried to frame words to ask her a certain question, but he failed.

She licked his cheek and she twined her fingers in his lacklustre hair. 'And one I should love to experience again, most passionate of anachronisms. It was as it must have been in those ancient days – when poets ranged the world, stealing what they needed, taking any fair maiden who pleased them, setting fire to the towns of their publishers, laying waste the books of their rivals: ambushing their readers. I am sure you were just as delighted, Werther. Say that you were!'

'Leave me!' he gasped. 'I can bear no more.'

'If it is what you want.'

'It is.'

With a wave of her little hand, she tripped from the room.

And Werther brooded upon her shocking words, deciding that he could only have misheard her. In her innocence she had seemed to admit an understanding of certain inconceivable things. What he had half-interpreted as a familiarity with the carnal world was doubtless merely a child's romantic conceit. How could she have had previous experience of a night such as that which they had shared?

She had been a virgin. Certainly she had been that.

He wished that he did not then feel an ignoble pang of pique at the possibility of another having also known her. Consequently this was immediately followed by a further wave of guilt for entertaining such thoughts and subsequent emotions. A score of conflicting glooms warred in his mind, sent tremors through his body.

'Why,' he cried to the sky, 'was I born! I am unworthy of the gift of life. I accused My Lady Charlotina, Lord Jagged and the Duke of Queens of base emotions, cynical motives, yet none are baser or more cynical than mine! Would I turn my anger against my victim, blame her for my misery, attack a little child because she tempted me? That is what my diseased mind would do Thus do I seek to excuse myself my crimes Ah, I am vile! I am vile!'

He considered going to visit Mongrove, for he dearly wished to abase himself before his old friend, to tell Mongrove that the giant's contempt had been only too well-founded; but he had lost the will to move; a terrible lassi-

tude had fallen upon him. Hating himself, he knew that all must hate him, and while he knew that he had earned every scrap of their hatred, he could not bear to go abroad and run the risk of suffering it.

What would one of his heroes of Romance have done? How would Casablanca Bogard or Eric of Marylebone have exonerated themselves, even supposing they could have committed such an unbelievable deed in the first place?

He knew the answer.

It drummed louder and louder in his ears. It was implacable and grim. But still he hesitated to follow it. Perhaps some other, more original act of contrition would occur to him? He racked his writhing brain. Nothing presented itself as an alternative.

At length he rose from his chair of unpolished quartz. Slowly, his pace measured, he walked towards the window, stripping off his power rings so that they clattered to the flagstones.

He stepped upon the ledge and stood looking down at the rocks a mile below at the base of the tower. Some jolting of a power ring as it fell had caused a wind to spring up and to blow coldly against his naked body. 'The Wind of Justice,' he thought.

He ignored his parachute. With one final cry of 'Catherine! Forgive me!' and an unvoiced hope that he would be found long after it proved impossible to resurrect him, he flung himself, unsupported, into space.

Down he fell and death leapt to meet him. The breath fled from his lungs, his head began to pound, his sight grew dim, but the spikes of black rock grew larger until he knew that he had struck them, for his body was a-flame, broken in a hundred places, and his sad, muddled, doom-clouded brain was chaff upon the wailing breeze. Its last coherent thought was: *Let none say Werther did not pay the price in full.* And thus did he end his life with a proud negative.

VI

In Which Werther Discovers Consolation

'Oh, Werther, what an adventure!'

It was Catherine Gratitude looking down on him as he opened his eyes. She clapped her hands. Her blue eyes were full of joy.

Lord Jagged stood back with a smile. 'Re-born, magnificent Werther, to sorrow afresh!' he said.

He lay upon a bench of marble in his own tower. Surrounding the bench were My Lady Charlotina, the Duke of Queens, Gaf the Horse in Tears, the Iron Orchid, Li Pao, O'Kala Incarnadine, and many others. They all applauded.

'A splendid drama!' said the Duke of Queens.

'Amongst the best I have witnessed,' agreed the Iron Orchid (a fine compliment from her).

Werther found himself warming to them as they poured their praise upon him; but then he remembered Catherine Gratitude and what he had meant himself to be to her, what he had actually become, and although he felt much better for having paid his price, he stretched out his hand to her, saying again: 'Forgive me.'

'Silly Werther! Forgive such a perfect rôle? No, no! If anyone needs forgiving, then it is I.' And Catherine Gratitude touched one of the many power rings now festooning her fingers and returned herself to her original appearance.

'It is you!' He could make no other response as he looked upon the Everlasting Concubine. 'Mistress Christia?'

'Surely you suspected towards the end?' she said. 'Was it not everything you told me you wanted? Was it not a fine 'sin', Werther?'

'I suffered . . .' he began.

'Oh, yes! *How* you suffered! It was unparalleled. It was equal, I am sure, to anything in History. And, Werther, did you not find the 'guilt' particularly exquisite?'

'You did it for me?' He was overwhelmed. 'Because it was what I said I wanted most of all?'

'He is still a little dull,' explained Mistress Christia, turning to their friends. 'I believe that is often the case after a resurrection.'

'Often,' intoned Lord Jagged, darting a sympathetic glance at Werther. 'But it will pass, I hope.'

'The ending, though it could be anticipated,' said the Iron Orchid, 'was absolutely right.'

Mistress Christia put her arms around him and kissed him. 'They are saying that your performance rivals Jherek Carnelian's,' she whispered. He squeezed her hand. What a wonderful woman she was, to be sure, to have added to his experience and to have increased his prestige at the same time.

He sat up. He smiled a trifle bashfully. Again they applauded.

'I can see that this was where "Rain" was leading,' said Bishop Castle. 'It gives the whole thing point, I think.'

'The exaggerations were just enough to bring out the essential mood without being too prolonged,' said O'Kala Incarnadine, waving an elegant hoof (he had come as a goat).

'Well, I had not . . .' began Werther, but Mistress Christia put a hand to his lips.

'You will need a little time to recover,' she said.

Tactfully, one by one, still expressing their most fulsome congratulations, they departed, until only Werther de Goethe and the Everlasting Concubine were left.

'I hope you did not mind the deception, Werther,' she said. 'I had to make amends for ruining your rainbow and I had been wondering for ages how to please you. My Lady Charlotina helped a little, of course, and Lord Jagged – though neither knew too much of what was going on.'

'The real performance was yours,' he said. 'I was merely your foil.'

'Nonsense I gave you the rough material with which to work. And none could have anticipated the wonderful, consummate use to which you put it!'

Gently, he took her hand. 'It was everything I have ever dreamed of,' he said. 'It is true, Mistress Christia, that you alone know me.'

'You are kind. And now I must leave.'

'Of course.' He looked out through his window. The comforting storm raged again. Familiar lightnings flickered; friendly thunder threatened; from below there came the sound of his old consoler the furious sea flinging itself, as always, at the rock's black fangs. His sigh was contented. He knew that their liaison was ended; neither had the bad taste to prolong it and thus produce what would be, inevitably, an anti-climax, and yet he felt regret, as evidently did she

'If death were only permanent,' he said wistfully, 'but it cannot be. I thank you again, granter of my deepest desires.'

'If death,' she said, pausing at the window, 'were permanent, how would we judge our successes and our failures? Sometimes, Werther, I think you ask too much of the world.' She smiled. 'But you are satisfied for the moment, my love?'

'Of course.'

It would have been boorish, he thought, to have claimed anything else.

TWO POEMS

MAC KING

WIND-DREAM

I had my first wind-dream.
After three nights no sleep sweating up at
kitchen tables while the thick flesh
of hospital numb minds died
I had a wind-dream!

We were in a new metallic hot-rod,
sleek and crazy,
burnin' farm country blacktop.
Like match hit gas we went through
dead midwest towns.
At strange hours
you hung obscenely around my neck
and made filling station men stare.

It was a quick dream,
just a sketch of your brown skin—

I remember quickly looking out the window
when I bolted out of bed here,
awake, alone again
with the clicking Minnesota rain-crickets.

MY WRECK

Everyone sleeps here
and late at night,
stir crazy,
I go through halls
with my hot black swollen eyes
burnt by lights and tight-bone fever.

Trap!

What do they want from me?
To take away my wreck?

The wind hums.
Hammer-drums dance
single file across . . . .
moon slices.

At breakfast they said
one poor fucker 'pulled the pin'
and ran his car off in a ditch
somewhere near Iowa.
My friend's the little welfare rummy
with the sixth grade education.

My wreck is my wreck—
to keep.

I want it.

MAL-ADJUSTMENT

B. J. BAYLEY

'I've thought a lot about invalids. The trouble about being an invalid or a cripple is that although you can make some sort of physical adaption to life, emotional adjustment is something else again. Take somebody without arms or legs, or somebody born as a dwarf or something. The doctors fix him up as best they can, but the point is he still tries to fit himself into the same normal life everybody else has. And yet he never can, because he's different and inadequate; so inside he never feels satisfied. At least you can't say that about me.'

'So you think you're doing all right?'

'Sure. Well, aren't I? It might look a bit strange, weird even, from your point of view but believe me it's you—'

'Let's go through the preliminaries again. We have established that you are Scouter Paul Arnheim 54627 who went missing on the Agtier sweep.'

'That's right. You know, I was pretty good looking in those days. Husky, blond and blue-eyed. You wouldn't think so now, would you?'

'No. So what happened on the sweep?'

'I decided to run a low-level survey on this planet. I was already in the atmosphere when the drive unit blew. It was so fast there was hardly any time to do anything. I brought her in, but came down with a hell of a smash and blacked out. I came round again, briefly. I was still in harness; my guts seemed to have spilled out. Already I'd seen from the air what kind of world it was, but for a few seconds I saw it afresh close up: red ochre and yellow ochre, nothing growing. I thought I was dying – naturally enough; because I *was* dying.'

'Apparently. When did you next come round again?'

'Well, I came partly to my senses a few times, but I didn't know much. There were weird sensations running through my body – I couldn't even start to describe them. Obviously they kept me under for practically all of what they were doing. When I recovered consciousness properly I was standing in a sort of doorway. There was light blue grass, about calf-high, stretching to the horizon. By my side a metal platform floated in the air, on a level with my waist, with my doctor riding on it. He – it – told me to try to walk. So I walked.'

'How did you feel when you saw yourself?'

'You must understand – in a scoutship you're all trussed up in your harness. You don't feel human, you feel like part of a machine. For a minute or so I felt like I was still in my harness, so it wasn't really much of a shock right then. I was still dazed. You don't mind it in harness because you know that eventually you'll come down again and experience all the normal human pleasures. When the truth hit me I just about cracked up.'

'You saw what we're seeing now?'

'Not quite. I've changed since then; I was more normal-looking. Anyway most of my attention was taken up with the doctor on the platform, to begin with. They're insectile, look like a dozen big centipedes sewn together. But they're clever, as you can see. Physically their metabolism works on a series of deadly acids – hardly any good to me. Nothing on this planet is any good to an ordinary human being. The doctor explained all that to me. The body they found was too damaged to be any use anyway, but even if they'd known how to patch it up and restore its original metabolism there'd have been nothing for me to eat here. He claimed he'd done the best he could, in fact he considered that he'd done a very fine job and I should be thankful. He pointed out that most living creatures needed organic material for food and that was a disadvantage on this planet where there are only one or two patches of growth and the rest is desert. I wasn't restricted in that way: I could go anywhere I liked in the dead lands and the doctor said I had an unusual measure of freedom.'

'You didn't agree with him?'

'No, not then. Would you? I wanted to die. He'd replaced practically the whole interior of my torso. Instead of guts, stomach and lungs I had this furnace. Actually it's an atomic

furnace fuelled by isotopes extracted from my food . . . It sizzles away inside me all the time. All I have to do is dig up certain minerals and metal ores which are easy to find and shovel them in. Eat them, in other words, through my mouth. The furnace breaks them down, extracts isotopes for energy, and builds them up again into carbon-based tissues. There's a lot of waste: it's surprising how much of it I need. I'm digging a good part of the day.'

'Scouter Arnheim, I think your courage will be remembered—'

'Forget it, I didn't have much courage. I was – well, aghast. I'd expected to find myself dead, but this was worse than dead. And I said so. I cursed that doctor and complained every way I knew how.'

'And?'

'He said I had no right to complain. If I wanted to die then I could go right ahead, that was my affair. He was a doctor and it was his duty to save life whenever he could. He'd done the right thing and that was his part of the affair. Then he turned me out.'

'Turned you *out*?'

'He told me to come back if anything gave trouble. He said I wouldn't be happy among his people and I would be better on my own. There was nothing cruel in that, because I agreed with him. They *are* pretty repulsive.'

'But you didn't kill yourself, evidently.'

'No. I didn't even let myself starve to death, though that would have been easy. Rock dust didn't seem very appetising in those days. I went out into the desert, armed with a spade. Somehow life carried on; they talk about the tenacity of life, don't they? . . . What they don't talk about is what life's all about, what a life without *pleasure* is like . . . It's dry, gritty stuff and it clogs the mouth. I knew I was here forever, that there was nothing to do except dig and eat. I was glad nobody could see me. Nobody human, I mean. I would have hated for a woman to see me. I still used to think about women then.

'One day I saw myself in a pool of water. The body tissues the furnace makes aren't the same as those an organic body makes. Slowly – not so slowly, either – all my old tissues were being replaced by the new kind. I looked like I was made out of rock. All craggy and pitted. My features weren't clear any more and my eyes were like little beads of mer-

cury. That was when I knew I'd reached the end of the road.'

'So you decided you couldn't go on?'

'You see, a malformed person has the problem that he's living in the wrong world. If he was in a world where everybody was the same as him and where nature had made them enjoy being like that he would be all right. They might look like they're crippled on the outside but really they're crippled on the inside. Because a life's only miserable if it's *incomplete*. You can't say that about me any more.'

'I'm not sure I follow you.'

'I suppose most of them don't have it too bad . . . Paraplegics can't get much fun, though. But you could use me as a real test case. You see, nature makes every creature enjoy what it has to do to win life. We like eating, sleeping, meeting people, exploring, working, having sex. Think of a mole. It burrows in the damp cold soil, eating worms or I don't know what. Or think of an earthworm. It wriggles its way through the soil, *eating* soil. You might think life's pretty awful for the earthworm, because you wouldn't like to have to live like that. But the earthworm *likes* what it's doing. That's what I mean about invalids and cripples. They can't do what makes life worthwhile. A worm that didn't like dirt would be in a pretty bad way. The doctors should make invalids *like* their infirmities instead of leaving them halfway patched up.'

'That happened to you?'

'The centipede doctors are a lot smarter than our Earth doctors. I went back and complained. I told him I wanted to finish it. But the centipede people never think of giving up; they always try to find a way round things. Straight away he realized that the mind has to be adapted to whatever conditions it lives in; conditions can't always be adapted to the wrong frame of mind. It's a matter of *libido*, you see. The doc knows how to alter libido so that instead of wanting, say, a woman, you want something else. He changes the objects of desire and enjoyment. Instead of wanting a steak you want . . .

'You wouldn't believe what pleasure I get out of life now. I love this place. Red ochre and yellow ochre, brazen sky. And digging. I just love digging, pushing the spade into the dry dusty earth . . . It's hard to describe how good it is. And the wonderful dry flavours of rock and metal ores. I have to watch my diet or I'd keep eating all the time.'

The Rescue Officer looked nervously at the vaguely man-

shaped lump of animate rock. 'I see . . . Well, are you coming with us? Together, our doctors and theirs might be able to do something for you. Of course, you'll never be . . . But at least you'll be home.'

'I *am* home. I wouldn't leave here for anything. I love this place. As a matter of fact I'd like you to leave now. I don't care for company and you're kind of . . . repulsive. I'm happy here. Yes. Digging, and more digging. It's the biggest thrill there is.'

THE KINDLY ONES

JOHN SLADEK

'Must be some sin,' the patient whispered. 'Must be I've committed . . . Barbara thought eating liver, maybe. Not that I've ever really liked liver . . . black coals or . . .'

From time to time, in the normal diagram of all such consultations, the doctor would lean forward across his scarred oak desk and ask a sympathetic question. From what time to what time?

'I hated to come to you,' the patient whispered, 'with a little complaint like this.'

'That's just what I'm here for, Mr Edhulme. And laryngitis isn't always such a "little complaint". Lots of flu going around these days. You may have picked up something. In any case, I know just the stuff.' He wrote a prescription, tore it off the pad and offered it. 'Two teaspoonfuls twice a day. If the throat doesn't clear up, come back and see me next week. All right?'

The doctor's behaviour is theoretically predictable: the movement forward, head rigid and eyes on his watch, the timbre of his voice, the frame of reference of his next remark. Of course, with the crude statistical tools of that day (Wednesday, June 20th), no such refined analysis would be possible.

'Picked up something, yes.' Edhulme made no move to go. Eleven thirty-two registered on the doctor's watch, which he had earlier removed and placed on the corner of his desk blotter. The chorus—

'Was there anything else, Mr Edhulme?'

'Well, it isn't just my throat trouble, doctor. There have been other little punishments. Going on for so long. Croak,

grawp.' Edhulme's whisper went on for so long, listing complaints: Popping of the ears, a bitten tongue, a slight backache . . .

'But there's nothing else wrong right now, at this moment in time?' asked the doctor at eleven thirty-four.

Tears rolled about Edhulme's eyes as he shook his head (Sorry to say, I'm healthy as a horse). The doctor promised to give him a complete checkup sometime. At some future date.

> These people believe that when the spell has been written on the prescription pad, the devil will go away. (Writing is strong magic, an aid to memory.) In reality, it is the *patient* who goes away. The doctor tears off the page and makes him walk out with it, leaving himself the blank pad. He does not want to remember the patient or his devil. When the patient has gone, he washes his hands.
>
> Pendleton's *Western Magic*

A dirty day. Edhulme's discarded prescription blew away down the street, driven by the same gust that dropped a fleck of dried mud in his eye. If you have anything in your eye, don't rub it Weeping helps.

Rubbing it. Edhulme rehearsed his next appointment: 'Barbara thought maybe it was Martians, operating out of radioactive canals or something. She's not too bright about the universe But take black holes . . .'

'No, no, the throat's fine. Only now I have this. *This.*' He opened his collar and peeled off a pink plastic patch to uncover a small boil.

'I see. Giving you a lot of pain, is it?'

Edhulme delivered his rehearsed sentence: 'It isn't the pain so much as the punishment. I just don't like the way they're getting at me. For what? That's what I'd like to know, for what?'

The chorus—

'They?'

'The way I see it, they probably come from outer space. Something to do with those black holes I've been reading so much about lately.'

'Black coals, I see.'

'*Holes*. Doctor, do you believe there is intelligent life all over the universe?'

Thus rages the old controversy. The doctor might select his reply from any of the time-honoured arguments disputed and refuted since the days of Origen – since the nights when man first looked into the sun and saw his own reflection. Is not life a Great Mystery? Define your terms. Is there intelligent life in this room? God does not play darts with the universe. Life is what you make it.

'Actually I don't know a great deal about astronomy,' he said. 'But what do you believe? Do you for instance believe that someone came from outer space to give you a small boil on the neck?'

'Well I know it sounds silly if you put it like that. All the same, these little punishments must mean something. Laryngitis. A nosebleed. Paper cuts. A slight toothache. Something in my eye for a whole day. One continual round of *torture*.'

The doctor doodled on his desk blotter. 'Come now, isn't that putting it a bit strong? We all suffer little complaints from time to time. A paper cut is hardly red-hot iron tongs. It's just part of life. We can't all go round wrapped in cotton wool, can we?'

The chorus continued, while Edhulme thought over this suggestion. 'I guess this just shows how clever they are. Using small things. If they broke my leg every week, you wouldn't dare think I was just a hypochondriac.'

The doctor said something soothing. He was there to help all his patients, etc. He doodled a burning man, running, apparently pursued by a telephone number. 'Tell me how you feel in general. Sleeping well?'

'Well enough, I suppose. Except when I had that ingrown toenail. I couldn't find a comfortable position where it wouldn't rub on the sheets.'

'Yes, you came to see me about that.'

'And as soon as it cleared up, I slept so soundly I got a stiff neck.'

'Hmm. Eating normally, are you?'

'I choke on my food a lot. I usually get some caught between my teeth, as well. Yesterday I sneezed a cup of tea up my nose. It wasn't hot tea, though. Last month, I burned my tongue—'

'Yes, yes. Are you worried about anything, say, at work?'

Edhulme described his job as exciting, secret, dangerous government scientific work. Mixing secret formulae in the interests of national defence.

'Really?'

No really he worked as a file clerk in a drawing office, for the local council. The copies of drawings which he filed had been developed by some ammonia process.

'The ammonia makes the paper cuts sting,' he said. 'I understand there may be forms of life in the universe that breath nothing but pure ammonia – imagine that.'

'Everything all right at home, then?'

Edhulme had been living with a cat, a budgie and a fiancée. The fiancée had left him. Who remained?

'Did these little "punishments" start after Barbara left you? After you quarrelled?'

The patient told him all about the space creatures.

'We can't know what they're like, for sure. They live in black holes, out in space. You can't see into a black hole, it's so dark. Invisible, like. It doesn't exist. If you fell into a black hole, did you know that time would come to a complete stop?'

'Is that so?'

'Or maybe it's the other way around. The main thing about a black hole is, nothing can ever get out of it, ever. It's very deep. The only thing that can get out are these little particles. They send them to strike me.'

'Particles.'

'I call them *punishons*. One struck me here on the neck.'

Listening to the chorus, the doctor framed another question: 'Why do you suppose they would want to punish you?'

'I don't know. Maybe they want to kill me, but they can't. Or maybe this is all for my own good. They want to reform me. Reform the world. They want me to give up everything and everyone.'

The doctor persuaded him to visit Dr Morphe, a psychiatrist. 'Just stop and see my receptionist on the way out. She can telephone for an appointment.' Over the intercom he told Doris to telephone for an appointment.

The chorus of coughs from the waiting room, which had paused for principal speeches, now resumed:

1st voice:	Or	Or	Or	Ora	Or	Ora	Or	Ora	Or	Or
2nd voice:	Ha	Ra-	a-	a-	a-	ark!				
3rd voice:	Emp		Emp	Emp		Emp	Emp		Emp	Emp

4th voice:		He			He-	Hume			He		
5th voice:			Ca-	hoot	Co-	hort			Ko-	hou-	tek-
6th voice:	ef		ef	ef		ef	ef	ef			ef

The man who limped in looked like a casualty from an animated cartoon: a great pear-shaped bandage on his thumb, a sling on the opposite arm, an oversized turban of surgical gauze, a plaster over the bridge of his nose – even a tiny flag of white toilet paper stuck to his chin by a Rising Sun drop of blood. The doctor recognized Edhulme at once.

'You can start by taking off all those home-made ornaments, starting with the sling. I don't suppose you've broken your arm?'

'Bumped my elbow.' Edhulme showed the doctor his sprained thumb, the boil on his nose, the spot where he'd banged his head on the bathroom cabinet door.

'I was washing my hair – terrible dandruff attack – and soap went into my eyes. Still, that's better than the stye I had—'

'Why didn't you keep your appointment with Dr Morphe?'

'I woke up on the day with murderous cold sores and a sore tongue. I could hardly talk.' The rest of the story vanished in a sneezing fit.

'If you won't seek help, Mr Edhulme, you'll just have to soldier on alone.'

'Alone? Yes, that's what they've been trying to tell me. My cat scratches me now, and I've got an allergy to my budgie's feathers. The little punishons are making me give up everyone.'

'They made you give up your girl? Your Barbara?'

'Well.' Edhulme's ears blushed. 'You see, I . . . it in my . . .'

'Sorry? I didn't catch that.'

The blush spread, showing up a dozen tiny white razor nicks on the patient's cheeks. 'I said I caught it in my trousers zip. Pinched it, the tenderest part. Well, *that* will never happen again, touch wood.' He touched the desk.

'That's an interesting old custom,' said the doctor. 'I believe it came from the Druids. worshipping their tree gods. It was dangerous saying anything positive without propitiating them. Touching wood.'

Edhulme looked at his finger, then sucked it.

'Splinter? Oh, I am sorry. This old desk . . .'

'It doesn't matter,' said the patient. Then, in a different voice:

'It doesn't matter. They're a superior intelligence, far beyond our petty imaginations. The ancients knew them but we've forgotten. They're going to return, though. Now that we need them again. They're coming back, to bring us world peace, and universal brotherhood, the government of love. Everyone speaking Esperanto and eating natural foods, and no one wearing any clothes. No more vaccination.

'But, but we're not ready for their gift of peace, not yet. We have to take the sword first. The sword of punishment, piercing us through and through, letting the light into our black souls. Till we're pierced through with the fire, the fire, the fire, the light, the starlight, the stigmata, the pierced windows of cathedrals, pierced like hearts, like saints, like IBM cards, like dead leaves, like dead butterflies, pierced—

'By the nail, the sword, the screw, the dagger, the arrow, the sperm, the needle, the claw, the pin, the quill, quarrel, the fork, the shrill bell, the shot, the dart, the staple, the ruby light, the lightning. The lightning.'

He smiled broadly, then winced and put a finger to his lower lip, bringing away a print of smudged blood.

'Dry lips,' he apologized. Ointment should be applied.

The doctor sat alone in the room and laughed until he hiccupped. To the intercom:

'Doris, give me a few – heep – minutes and then send in Mr – hup – Mr Griver.'

No answer. The receptionist's telephone was ringing, and no one answering that.

'Doris?'

No one was coughing in the waiting room.

Doctors also live inside fragile bodies, with surfaces exposed to wind, grit, bacteria, chafing clothes, invisible dangers, rays from every direction, unseen spores, ridicule, the crossfire of assassins. Most medical men cure this fear by thinking of poor, hateful Edhulme, his corns, his halitosis. Failing a self-cure, a doctor may be struck off the Medical Register. A line is drawn through his name. His patients and his Doris vanish; he himself becomes a 'black hole'.

Black holes are not, however, empty. Every black hole is actually crammed with an intense presence. Astronomers now believe that black holes are neurotic: They may be

calling out to us, saying *hello*, or even *help*. But of course we can never receive their possible communications.

There was no one in the waiting room, no one behind the reception desk. The doctor found Doris and his patients outside, looking at a man who lay in the street. Edhulme had been run down by a lorry.

A dirty day, but real. Edhulme lay trembling by the wheel of the lorry. There were sculpted clumps of dried mud scattered around him, as though he'd burst from a mould. No, of course the mud had fallen from the vehicle's mudguard, which had struck him. The doctor scraped a spot clean with his foot, then knelt to examine the patient.

'Don't try to move, Mr Edhulme. Just take it easy.'

The patient made no deliberate move or sound. He wore a cheap, dark-brown suit, a shirt with small brown-and-white checks, frayed at the collar, and a green knit tie. One of his brown scuffed shoes had come off, showing a hole in the toe of his grey wool sock. Adding to his generally old-fashioned appearance was the cut of his mud-brown hair: very short at the sides and brushed back from a deep widow's peak. His face was long and sallow, with large pores around the base of the nose.

On the long chin, the tiny Japanese flag of toilet paper fluttered in the breeze. The doctor, when he had finished his examination, tore it away.

'Ouch,' murmured the patient, and died.

A policeman helped him to his feet. 'Don't take it so hard, doctor,' he said, quietly. 'I know you done your best to save him.'

'He told me what happened, constable. It seems he was crossing the road when his leg suddenly went to sleep. Pins and needles. He simply keeled over in front of it.'

'Right,' said the driver. 'He fell right in front of me. What could I do?'

Old Mrs Chatterhand seemed to want to add something, but all she finally said was, 'Or or or or or.'

THE RETURN OF THE MANDARIN

RICK GELLMAN

Sound of footsteps on simile cobblestone. Sound of footsteps making the sound of footsteps. Footsteps on a dark and dimly lit street. Poor street. Rundown street. Dead-end street.

The street led nowhere. Oh, true – one driving would not hit a barrier at the end and have to turn around, but those who lived in this and similar streets would go nowheres else.

Footsteps continuing.

Face of a man – looking straight ahead but seeing everything in nearly 180° of arc.

Slight tenuous mist on street, not quite obscuring anything but making its presence known.

Footsteps continuing.

Drunk stumbling into view, muttering to self, head down – swaying lightly on heavy feet. Heading toward footsteps not hearing them.

Footsteps walking invisible straight line.

Drunk stumbling into footstepmaker. Suddenly belligerent. Head lifting to look at this blocker of the path home. Mouth making sour/surly 'why-the-hell-don-cha-watch-where-ya-goin' sounds. Seeing face. Sounds stop articulating. Mouth: unclosed, slowly metamorphosing into reflection of horror. Face: melting into mask of fear. Legs: semi-co-ordinately extending backward carrying feet and body away. Drunk becoming something akin to being sober. Mouth still trying to produce sound – and failing.

Steel face staring back. Staring straight ahead. Eyes: tilted slightly off the ecliptic – downward. Facial muscles

unmoving: watching. Watching this cringing blob of protoplasmic life haltingly retreating . . .

. . . retreating, and finally breaking the spell of those eyes, eyes the color of absolute zero, turning and stumblerunning away, feet echoing on pavement until – silence.

Sounds of footsteps once more returning to their cadence.

Change of scene but scene unchanged.

City. Sun shining on slum street. Children playing children games – corresponding to age groups: making children noises, drowning out the sound of footsteps on cement sidewalk, unmoving sidewalk.

Ball: escaping children captors. Bouncerolling toward footsteps. Footsteps stopping. Ball rolling against feet and dying. One pigmy warden chasing/running after ball. Stooping to pick up ball. Looking up at stranger/stopper. 'Thanks for stop (whisper) . . . ing—'

Seeing eyes, seeing cruel orifice slash, seeing immobile face, seeing corners of mouth almost indetectably scimitar upwards – two muscles feebly twitching microsecondly – into a proto-ghost of a death-smile, a movement measurable in millimeters.

Waif-face become wraith-face. Eyes of terror. Lips of panic. Body of flight.

Fleeing. Fleeing past parked vehicles, fleeing past playmates, fleeing past street, fleeing momentarily past sanity into instinctive dread/reflexive fear.

Footsteps resume. Sound of footsteps resumes. This time heard. Rest of street is silent except for distant sounds. Denizens of street are frozen: from movement, from thought – except to shrink and mentally shriek when the eyes glance at them.

The footsteps pass on – but none lose their sound – ever.

Suburbs. Healthy children, faithless wives, restless husbands. Typical suburbs. Like others he has visited/will visit.

Walking thru suburbs. Sound of footsteps – on pavement, on sidewalk, on ground, on grass – grass that would eventually rise after being crushed – as it always had. Grass that was unknowing, uncaring of he who passed, uncaring of the difference of he who passed.

Most did not see him. Some did. Those who did felt the chill/the whisper of the breath of time. Felt the chill, not around them – in them. Those that did not see him didn't feel the chill. But it was there for them also.

Dog. Pet. Small friendlyfurry, self-appointed home-guardian out to halt/greet the advancing footsteps, barking welcome/warning. Glancing up at the slightly asiatic face, ascetic face. Glancing up at the eyes of absolute zero. At deepset distant eyes.

Footsteps stopping. Eyes looking back under now furrowed brows, above high-set prominent cheek-bones raised to pinnacles by gaunt hollow cheeks – cheeks undercentred by unbent, thin lips. Lips that now bent into their cruel smile when a small flicker appeared deep in the galactic reaches of the eyes.

Foot lifting – lazily positioning itself on the neck of the no longer barking nowwhimpering/struggling small friendly-furry. Foot pressing down. Slowly. Inexorably. Inexorable foot watched by the face. Face of eyes shimmering sadism. Face of mouth leering evil – evil incarnate/incarnadine.

Face watching foot slowly, ruthlessly crush the life and soul of the offending barker.

Face becoming contempt: eyes, cheeks, brows. Lips of sneer. Foot: releasing dog. Not kicking.

Dog: Unmoving for a second, realizing it was still alive; then, scampering away in fear. Consuming abject fear that leaves no room for anything else – tail hidden as it ran.

No sound of footsteps. Feet unmoving. Standing on crest of hill. Eyes looking down, eyes looking out in distance.

He had seen much. Not all. Not most. But much. More than enough. He had seen urban, suburban, rural – what was left of it. He had been all over the planet reconnoitering. It had been many years since he had last looked around/since he had last been around.

Now he stood. On a hill. Overlooking the last city, the last place, the last area to be reconnoitered. He stood. Looking out. Wind blowing at his back – not daring to blow too strongly. He looked at the city below him. The spaceport beyond it, the shantytown slumjungle directly beneath him towards the bottom of the hillside.

Looking up, his gaze caught/held a shining spaceship

lancing upwards – clean in the sunlight. Mouth: twisting into a sardonic, mildly sarcastic grin – left corner inching up higher/faster than right corner. Eyes: dismissing spaceship, turning, swooping down to wash over the corroded, crumbling, corrugated tin shacks of poverty.

Eyes: really gleaming, dancing with light – for the first time in a long while/too long a while. Looking at the world.

Face: still drawn and gaunt. Slightly more than faintly asiatic.

Mouth: curved cruelly, lips maliciously pleasant/unpleasant. Ghengis Khan moustache drooping downward with near-venom framing, intensifying cruelty of mouth.

He smiled.
Now it would
begin.
He had
returned.

G. I. SPARROW

GERARD E. GIANNATTASIO

The United States has only one small bird of entirely blue plumage. That bird is the indigo bunting. I did not, therefore, pay much attention to the earlier phone calls. When the callers insisted that the bird they wished me to identify was not a blue jay, purple martin, black-throated blue warbler, barn swallow, or common bluebird, I said again: Indigo bunting is what it has to be.

The reported behavior of the buntings was a touch odd. They foraged in two rough lines while one of their number sang 'chirp, chirp, chirp-chirp-chirp'. The bird calling this cadence (usually referred to by my phone-callers as the 'sergeant') hopped around the outskirts of the formation. When danger threatened, his song stopped and the group took flight. At first I thought the callers meant that this 'sergeant bird' had actual wingbars, but he did not – which let off the nuthatch and blue grosbeak.

By the second week I was letting Mrs Coulter, the department secretary, field inquiries about what had come to be named the 'G.I. sparrow'. She caught me between classes to pass on the intelligence that government teams were shooting the birds with tranquilizing darts and packing them into wicker baskets for banding.

I was surprised. Tranquilizing guns are usually reserved for large, dangerous animals in the order of lion and rhinoceros. Birds to be banded are netted. I'd never heard of anyone using darts before: in addition to expense, the likelihood of hitting a vital spot, and thus killing the bird, would be too great.

When further calls revealed that the bird-banding teams were travelling around the county in beautifully preserved trucks of Roaring Twenties vintage, simple curiosity impelled me to make a few calls myself.

I spoke with the Fish and Wildlife Service, the State Game Board, the county Audubon Society, and the Wading Brook Conservation Union. The last organization on my list was the university bird-watching club. I dialed the first two digits before remembering that I was their faculty advisor and that the number was my own. Don't ever become a college professor: everything you've heard about us is true.

None of these groups was undertaking a massive campaign to band indigo buntings, alias G.I. sparrows, alias cadence chirpers, alias little blue marching birds. To be sure I'd hit the lot, I called Teufelbesis at the nearest state university branch and Dryfesdale at Graphon College, a small Catholic school in Division township. As I suspected, no one had wrangled a special grant. The only large-scale, organized banding in the area was being done by Symons, whose office was next to mine. His project was a condition of the Danson bequest and, as such, strictly limited to waterfowl.

In the end I did nothing that day: press of teaching duties. The very next morning, however, the problem came to me.

The Biology Department has its offices in Maynard Hall, overlooking Exhibition Green. The green takes its name from the Art Department's ancient prerogative of using the space as an outdoor gallery. On that particular spring day several avant-garde metal sculptures were squatting in colorful abandon under the elms.

I was sitting in my office on the corner of the second floor, when I heard a strange, but by now immediately recognizable call.

'Chirp, chirp, chirp-chirp-chirp.'

From my window I could see a platoon of G.I. sparrows moving in two ragged skirmish lines across the green, their sergeant keeping a sharp lookout and counting cadence. Unfortunately his lookout was not sharp enough.

Coming to a stop between Maynard and Wallace Auditorium was an early Renault truck. The sloped, angular coal-scuttle hood, spoked wheels, and big brass headlights were excellent field marks.

A platoon of another sort was debouched from the truck, wearing drab coveralls stenciled ambiguously 'Wildlife Service'. Two of them steadied stout-stocked, short-barreled guns on the Renault's half-moon fenders and fired noiselessly at the foraging birds.

The sergeant bird stopped calling cadence and the flock

took flight. The gunners got most of the birds before they were a foot from the ground.

The collection of tiny bodies was well underway by the time I reached the green. The single woman in the group appeared to be in charge. I came up behind her. Another coveralled figure was reporting to her in the unmistakable tone of NCO to officers, 'Damn squaddies. One got away, Donna.' Donna seemed spoken as a title rather than a personal name.

'I'm Professor Scroppa,' I said loudly. 'What's going on with these birds?' I wanted to be a problem for them. I spoke peremptorily, pompously, hoping to put them off balance.

The woman turned. The features were sharply defined, the nose forceful. It was her eyes which made her memorable: the color of a scarlet tanager's breast and flecked with kelly green. They were not albino's eyes: there was pigmentation They stunned against tanned skin, framed by raven hair. 'These birds are being captured for banding purposes,' she said 'They will be released later, unharmed.'

'I see,' I said. 'I'm an ornithologist. Perhaps I could have a specimen for cataloguing. They appear to be far out of their normal range.' The brilliant eyes crinkled. I kept pushing. 'I've had nothing but calls from bird watchers for the last two weeks.'

I was peripherally aware of the sergeant making unobtrusive hand signals to the men with wicker baskets. They were a sharp team; I hoped I was sharper.

'I am sorry,' she said. 'my instructions are to bring in all I find for weighing and banding. If you will excuse me?' She walked toward the still-running Renault, following her hurrying men. Her arms were a hand's length too short. Also, her manner of walking was distinctly odd, yet with a natural, swinging grace.

I watched as the truck backed smoothly and turned. Our campus walks are wide enough to allow passage of maintenance and delivery vehicles. I wondered idly what she'd told the gatekeeper to pass them in. With eyes like those it needn't have been much.

When the truck was out of sight, I walked over to the Art Department's latest sheet-metal and iron-rod monstrosity. I lifted a still-warm blue body from where it had fallen among a jumble of vivid blue and yellow braces. It was plump and heavy and dead.

Two hours later I had completed the dissection.

All in all it had been a good day for biological surprises: a woman with eyes of claret and emerald, and a little blue bird which brings forth its young alive.

The university doesn't close down its coal-fired heating plant until May 15 and it was mid-April. I carried the remains of the mother and the five cubs, three of them mewing feebly, to the North Campus. Old Carl was out; he had left a football player on scholarship to mind the store.

The stench wasn't particularly pleasant. After they had burned completely, I took the long handled fire tender and raked what was left of the G.I. sparrows well into the glowing embers.

The house sparrow, imported from England in 1850, became a serious pest after driving out the native purple finch. The muskrat, introduced to Europe from Canada, is now undermining Holland's dikes. The gypsy moth, introduced from Europe to the northeastern United States where it has no natural enemies, is razing our forests. The list is long and growing. As a biologist, the idea of a socially organized mammal competing for an ecological niche with our local songbirds fills me with the screaming horrors.

I don't know who that red-eyed girl is or what government pays the Wildlife Service she belongs to, but they've got the right idea. I only hope they succeed.

And the G.I. sparrow doesn't chirp, it barks.

A MODEST PROPOSAL

BERTIL MÅRTENSSON

concerning how to open Pandora's Box (or, The rebellion of the Italian sewing-machine making village)

They had been waiting for him for years. He had known that all the time. And he'd be ready soon. Until then he did not think about them. Not very often anyway.

If I close my eyes and concentrate I can feel the faint, almost imperceptible breeze from the vast shore out there. If I open them I can contemplate the size of a rock which comes above the water six feet from my left foot. I know because I measured the distance yesterday with a ruler.

Mme de Scudery has been trying for months to open the box, without success. At last she decides to give up. I don't care, she writes in her diary. Besides, does it really matter – now?

In December John Baines Lyxon announced that he was going to become President of the United States of America. The very same day pro-American demonstrations turned into riots in Moscow and a small village in Italy declared itself a sovereign independent non-allied state.

The announcement was made after the local police force had taken over the local radio station. The Mayor delivered it. He denoted himself as Mao the first. His first act was to read this statement to the world.

'We shall be free herewith. No one shall disturb our peace. We want to be left alone. We will survive any communist or imperialist attack. We have invented a new health drug which has made us immortal. Our sole export article will be a new, I might proudly say, drastically new sewing

machine. We expect to deliver twenty-five per month for the first decade as a minimum and we can meet any increase of our market.'

The self-appointed American President declared this to be an unprovoked attack on the Free World. Asked what he intended to do about the affair, he declined to answer. 'I haven't had the time to prepare a statement,' he said. 'But I can say this: wherever freedom is at the stake, nothing can, will or does stop us.' He added that all Americans were immortal according to the constitution and departed quoting the Gettysburg Address.

When she tried again, she found she could not make up her mind. If it is a box, there should be a way of opening it, she reasoned. All the time it lay there on the table, like a challenge.

Behind me there is a constant roaring from the ships passing on the highway. It is deafening. Whenever I look at the rock it seems to shrink. Far out, near the horizon I can see cars sailing past. The rock is now, I just measured, eight feet from my left foot. Is it departing from me, or am I departing from it? Perhaps I am – in reality – the President of the United States of America?

Holding it in her hand, she tried then to argue with it. It didn't answer, of course. And somehow that didn't surprise her. And after all, she had decided to give the whole thing up. I wonder what is in it?

We are ready now!

I wonder, thought Mme de Scudery, why they always call me Pandora?

The self-appointed American President ordered all portraits of Lincoln to be repainted in his own likeness.

The rock is gone. The ocean took it. My poor rock.

The escalation of the unofficial war between the U.S. and a small Italian village, supposedly due to the latter's intense export of sewing machines, started to annoy several statesmen. Riots broke out in major cities. China declared war on Denmark. At the same time it sent a small note to the Danish government, saying that this was just a diversion, not to be taken seriously. The True Enemy of the Chinese People was, of course, all those flying saucers.

'We shall,' declared Mao the first of an Italian village, 'go on exporting our sewing machines as long as we feel there is a market. You can kill us to the last man, but you cannot stop us exporting sewing machines.'

The strangeness to sit on the watery surface, silence in front of me, all those ships speeding past like swift bullets behind.

I think I know now, she said, her fingers trembling. Yes.

President John Baines Lyxon told an expert group of native scientists to find a peaceful way of stopping this dreadful war. They developed a certain new mutation of a virus, which . . .

We are ready now!

And so she opened the box.

THE JEWEL THIEF

RONALD ANTHONY CROSS

Many stare from the windows here, but they stare at one thing. Then, in a myriad of fragments, the thing happens. Each way it happens, it happens, but only once.

Here there are many doors to one house, and all of us coming in and out, too much to keep track.

Mind is drifting all ways at once, in a confusion of colors.

A slow explosion of stars.

Someone has drugged the drinks. I lean over close to the candle and look anxiously into her eyes for some sign. Her expression is like glass. Her features are of crystal. Her eyes are diamonds. The air about her is a vacuum. She wears the void like a spider wears a cloak. Someone is giggling, and underneath that, something is ringing in the room at the highest pitch of perception. A clock, a clock, a clock is ticking. Then everything halts, hush.

'If you would dance with danger, my love, you must invite pain to the party.' Who is saying that? Who has drugged the drinks? With slow astonishment I realize it was I who spoke. I lean forward, feeling myself drawn into the enormous ruby nestling between her small, perfect breasts, just above the low-cut gown. Something about the ruby. Someone is giggling aloud. We are all drugged. How does one know what one does? I must reverse the process, push back into my mind. Bring everything into the light, the sunlight.

The sun, dust, the road. An endless stream of days, drifting on dusty roads, stealing, begging, and what is it? Yes, of course, juggling little colored balls, tumbling, turning, hanging in the air, four of them, five of them. No, farther back; there are only three of them. How old must I have been –

ten, twelve, eight, a child. Now I am turning cartwheels and handsprings for pennies in the road. Picking pockets, begging, turning, twisting, tumbling, too fast, too fast, nothing stays, everything moves, changes.

Mind won't stay still. It's fading, fading, gone. I lean forward and look into the girl's eyes; she's giggling insanely, and her face is changing like a kaleidoscope.

Several people have gotten to their feet, but they're staggering, lurching, some of them laughing. They want to do something. But they've forgotten, like myself, whatever it is we are all doing. A dance perhaps, turning, twisting, tumbling.

Drifting, the dust, the road, begging, stealing, lost in an endless sea of faces. A forest, lost in a forest of great trees, coming to the house, looking in the window, where awaited me a scene of breathtaking beauty.

My clothes, which were rags to begin with, were now torn to pieces. My body was covered with scratches and bruises; the trees, the shrubbery, were an impenetrable wall, to all save a snake, or a boy of ten, small for his age, an acrobat. I had been crying hysterically, completely given way. It was as though, realizing I was lost in the woods, I also realized I had been always lost, always alone. No mother, no father, no family, no home. It was within rumors I lived, we all lived. Stories from drifters, far travelers.

'Where are you heading, honorable sir?'

'South for the winter, my young acrobat, southeast to the sea, then south along the coast. Several months' journey, one comes to cities where it's always warm, and all the women are beautiful and generous, and everyone is rich. A fair price they'd pay to a handsome young acrobat, nay, a small fortune would be more like it. Yourself doing tricks to catch the eye, myself to work among the crowds, catching whatever purses should chance to jump into my willing hands, and later we could split our fortune and go our ways. Myself perhaps the lonely road, for the call of the road is in my blood, and yourself, a handsome boy, a cunning juggler, who's to say that some rich pretty woman who spends the warm nights grieving for her lost child might not find in you the love our Lord has taken away from her, in all of His majestic wisdom. A touching story, my young friend, with a happy ending in it for yourself.' It was in such useless dreams I drifted.

While we were working a small town a week later, a man

in the crowd cried out, 'My purse, I've been robbed.' My companion of the road immediately shouted from within the crowd where he worked, 'The boy, the boy is one of them. Don't let him escape, hang him, hang him.'

And I ran, a terrified rabbit with the mob on its heels like a pack of hounds, while he walked calmly out of the other end of town with all of the stolen purses.

Even then I hadn't panicked. You didn't live to be ten years old on the road if you panicked. I ran steadily, calmly, and with all the skill my way of life had brought me in such matters. They faded behind. I skirted the deeper parts of the woods, kept my direction always in my mind, parallel to the road. Then a sound to freeze the hearts of the hunted. The keening of hounds, hot on a scent. The dogs had set their dogs on me. No choice now; I cut away from the road, and wherever the trees and underbrush grew thickest, wherever the thorns were sharpest, I plunged in.

So there I was, lost, alone. I lost track of the road; I lost track of the dogs and I lost track of time itself. I just scrambled, pulled, pushed, and squirmed on my belly where I had to, deeper into the woods, crying silently to myself all the while.

Then at twilight, just when the light grows elfin and you're not sure of anything you see, I saw the house.

I looked in the window and caught my breath, and held it.

A warm rosy light glowed inside the room. It did not seem as if it could have come from outside.

A calm man, like a father, sat cross-legged on the dirt floor, relaxed and seemingly unwatching. His eyelids were partially lowered as if dozing, and yet, one knew he was alert within himself. His skin was nut brown, and his hair and beard were full, grey, and tangled as the forest outside. A fat grey cat with crossed seagreen eyes was creeping up on a small red bird, perhaps a cardinal of some sort. The cat's goofy, somehow guilty glance kept switching back and forth between the bird and the master, both of whom seemed not to notice him at all, the bird dozing or meditating like the master.

At the last moment, just before it sprang, the cat paused with what seemed to be a puzzled expression. It just couldn't do it. The cardinal turned and eyed him, cocking his head, as birds do, as if to say, 'What a fine fellow.' Then he hopped

over and began to preen the cat's fur with his short sharp bill, hunting, I suppose, for fleas.

A slender figure which I had noticed, but mistaken for a statue, began to move toward the only furniture in the room, a low table with a basket of fruit on it. A great golden stork, moving like liquid, drifted to the table and speared with its long bill an apple, which it carried to the master, then it moved back to its corner, where it became immobile.

The cat and the cardinal cuddled up on the floor together and slept.

And as the light faded slowly, the master sat facing away from me, holding the apple outward from his body as if offering it to someone in the room. Suddenly he spoke, in a sweet but shrill voice.

'Come in, my son, the apple is for you.'

I went in the window. I went in the window into days of warmth after warmth.

Days of playing with the grey cat and red bird. Creeping in the woods. Or journeying with the master to pick fruit and gather herbs. Sometimes I would juggle for hours, my mind peaceful, contented, no thoughts, only the rising and falling of the four colored balls, while the master unwatched with another eye. (Yes, it was four now.) How many days spent at his feet soaking up love? Nights the golden stork would awake for a few minutes and drift dream-like to carry apples to the kind master. Days of profound simplicity.

Thoughts began to fall away, and somehow, as my thoughts grew fewer, and simpler, they acquired a clarity and power I had never dreamed of, as if merely being in the presence of this calm man began to change my very essence.

How many days? And yet, days fall by like drops of rain and no hand may hold them. One leaves, that's all. One leaves the bad, and one leaves the good and one leaves, alone.

So I turned back toward the forest, while they watched me from the window. The window.

The windows are shifting. Many rooms lived in by the same thing, but the same thing always changing. One thing.

I lean over close to the candle and look anxiously into her eyes for some sign.

Over her right shoulder a hazy, stumbling, drunken figure momentarily pulls itself erect. The count. His face comes clear now, suspicion, anger, directed somehow at me. Other figures, shadowy figures, are on their feet, but stumbling and

laughing, devoid of purpose. They've drugged the drinks. For the moment the count succumbs. He drops back into his chair. He can't remember. What is it we are all trying to remember? I can't help laughing. The count's expression shifts back and forth from drunkenness to hatred like a blinking light. His eyes are twin torches of anger. Torches, what is it about torches. A cave.

The light of two torches was the only light of the cave.

I was juggling, the pretty colored balls rising and falling in the flickering light of the torches. There were five now.

'A pretty trick for a would-be assassin.' The man I knew as Abdul, but who was known to many by many names, was on the dirt floor of the cave, carefully stretching his long rubbery muscles, preparing for combat.

I was a young man now, and he in his mid-thirties, both of us supple. He tall and lean, I quite small and ferret-like.

As if a cold wind had struck us, we both shivered, for Kang had entered the cave.

A tiny, ancient man like a little doll, with yellow skin. He was dressed in loose silk pantaloons and blouse and it seemed that he was all white hair and wrinkles and small beady eyes. And he was old, so old. Brave men knew fear at the sound of his name, and mothers in many lands frightened their naughty children with stories of his powers. Terrible Kang. He smiled. In a surprisingly soft, low voice, he said, 'Begin.'

At these times Abdul would rise from the floor smiling, certain of victory, and toss spinning across the cave a knife, or perhaps a club, which I would catch.

In the center of the cave we would meet, I in the form of a dancing acrobat, and Abdul a snake, supple, strong, tireless, and quick, so quick.

We would fight bitterly, myself nicked, bruised, until finally I gave way and he stood over me where I lay on the floor of the cave, disarmed, exhausted.

Later each of us would spar barehanded with Kang, the terrible. Small, hard and cunning as a spider he was. Without ever appearing to move fast or to exert himself in any way he would defend against our most ferocious attacks. Whichever way we turned, we would find he had just shifted slightly away from us and was now boring in from some new unexpected point, so it seemed that he formed a living web about us with his body.

He touched us from time to time, suggestively violent, and

yet as soft as a whisper, with his hand like a claw at the throat, and the point of one finger a needle just touching the point of the temple. We were helpless in his hands.

'Be the crane,' he would say. 'Be the panther. Follow the footsteps of the ancients and dance, always just beyond reach. Strike with the fire of the eyes, thus.'

Suddenly I froze, rigid as ice. He had caught me with his eyes and paralyzed me for the attack.

He stood before me, smiling mercilessly. He put his tiny hand deliberately on my shoulder and pushed me to the floor.

As I began to come out of it, I saw Kang walk away in the proud smooth gait of the ancients, and heard Abdul's mocking laughter.

Terrible Kang. I remember once I said to Abdul that surely he himself was a master, why didn't he leave the service of the Kang and go off on his own.

'No one leaves the service of the Kang,' he said. 'These secrets are his, and we who learn them are his, as long as he lives, and he lives long indeed.'

No one leaves Kang, and yet, as the little colored balls I juggle are always moving, nothing ever remains fixed. One leaves the good, one leaves the bad, and one always leaves alone.

Again the road, the dust. Again the loose endless stretching of time. The stealing, the juggling, the easy laughter, until one day, in a strange land, the princess, a full but tiny figurine perhaps, on a balcony, waving to the admiring crowd. And next to her stood a count, and next to him stood Abdul, imperial guardian of the royal princess, and about her neck on a golden chain lay the stone of my dreams, the largest ruby in the world, known as the firebird.

The firebird, dreams of a thief. Rubies are dancing in my dreams. Rubies are shining in my eyes and I don't know . . .

If I can only remember. Remember. They have drugged my drink. They have drugged all of the drinks. Things are slowing down. I lean over close to the candle and look anxiously into her eyes for some sign. She holds a rainbow butterfly on a little slender rod, delicately between her finger and thumb. She has become a plant. I can see the tint of green, breathe the chlorophyll. They have all become plants. How comical. How incredibly comical. I am laughing hysterically. All of the plants are laughing hysterically. The laughter is turning into bubbly green waves, splashing

all over me, so cool, so clean.

A giant tree is towering over me, its branches threatening me, its voice booming out.

'Where is Haroud, what have you done with Haroud?' The tree changes into the count.

'Haroud has changed into a plant,' I say, laughing hysterically. 'You are all plants.' The count gives up again, falls back in his chair laughing. We are all laughing. Then he leans toward me, still laughing; he says, 'Later, I'm going to kill you.'

But it's not later. It's now. Today. Today, of course, back into my mind, but today, only today.

The sound of waves. The sound of a voice speaking, my own.

'Just to think, my old friend, Abdul the assassin has graduated to the rank of imperial guardian of the princess. Only it's not Abdul now, it's Haroud. I must try to be more clever and remember that, it wouldn't do to mention the name of a hired assassin in the same breath as Haroud the imperial guardian of the princess. They might mistakenly think you meant her harm of some sort, little suspecting your master the Kang has decided to atone for his evil ways by hiring out his men as guardians and protectors of ladies fair.'

'Walk lightly, little mouse,' he said. 'Little mice have slipped before, and been eaten by some larger beast of prey.'

'But not I, Abdul, I never slip any more.' I turned cartwheels around him in the sand. 'Except with the tongue. Do forgive me, I'm so careless. I must remember it's Haroud now. And I his visiting cousin, Rashim the magnificent, juggler, acrobat, trained warrior, and now, assistant to Haroud, confidant of the princess, and I might add, quite a romantic figure to such a sheltered little fool.'

'Dog, thief, moron.' Abdul continued, in a low voice. 'Are you insane to blackmail me when you should be running for your useless life. What are you after, any way? Is it that toy, the ruby? You would dare the Kang for a stone, like those pretty little balls you juggle and play with? You think his mind can't find ours when they are linked. He knows, oh, he knows, and he's coming to you like fire on to wood.'

Inside my mind I felt a jolt. Deep, deep within, other minds feeling, touching, finding. He knew, all right. And someone else also knew. Someone I couldn't quite place.

'We're out of sight, fool, and I don't see that I have any further use for an assistant.' He was casually taking a knife from his belt. It was the first time I had allowed myself to be caught alone with him since a week previously, when I had launched myself into his arms, much to his astonishment, in front of everyone, crying out, 'Beloved cousin, how wonderful, we can be together now and I may aid you in your duties as guardian. I have finished the school for weaponry and hand-to-hand combat with highest honors and came immediately upon receiving your letter.' Then quickly to the king, 'Oh, resplendant sire, your faithful guardian Haroud feared for the princess's safety, wearing the royal jewel so casually at all of the banquets. Hearing of my completion of training, he immediately wrote me, imploring me as I loved the royal family to rush to his side and aid him in his worthy life's task. As to my humble abilities' – Here I jerked a dagger from the belt of one of the guards and hurled it spinning across the crowd to pick a stately, pompous hat from the head of a stately, pompous man, the count, and pin it to the wall — 'such as they are,' I continued, 'they belong not to myself but only to my liege, my lord, and my princess.' I fell to my knees in a humble bow Amid the polite applause, Abdul had embraced me, his arms like steel bands, and said as he looked lovingly into my eyes, 'My dear cousin, I can't wait until we are alone to talk over old times.'

Since then I had taken every precaution never to get caught alone by Abdul, and slept with bolted door and one eye open.

This afternoon we had gone for a walk on the beach with the count and the princess and a small retinue of guards.

When the princess sent Abdul off to search for sea shells, I, to his surprise, went with him.

Now that we were at last alone, and out of everyone's sight, he began to circle me, warily, his wicked curved knife weaving figures in the air, as was his style.

'Oh, you have need of an assistant, you blundering oaf,' I said 'But the assistant has no more need of you.'

Then he was on me like a snake striking. As we curled through the air, I caught his right wrist and clung to it even as our bodies hit the sand, he above, myself below.

Light danced about in the sand. It flashed and sizzled off Abdul's blade.

He tried to force down my hand. I held back his arm. A

bead of sweat came across his forehead, dropped slowly onto my face. We never moved. Whatever passed between us was shattered by light.

I looked into Abdul's eyes, then smiled 'Times change,' I said, and for the first time Abdul sensed I was toying with him. He started to scream.

Half way within his scream I froze him, with the knife up over me, gleaming in the light. I crawled out from under him.

He crouched in the blinding sand, dagger poised, mouth open in an unfinished scream.

I took out my little jeweled cigarette box (a gift from the princess, but not the gift I wanted), and opened it. I sprinkled the cigarettes in the sand, then I sat down next to the frozen figure I began to talk to him though I knew he couldn't hear me.

'How times change, my friend. Nothing stands still. Things weave. When all is said and done, juggling is the art supreme, the grand truth, and Kang or no Kang I have decided to have the jewel, and have the jewel I shall.'

I turned myself on full power, and I looked deeper and deeper into Abdul. Then I had it. I leaned over and delicately plucked away the essence of his self and put it inside of the cigarette box. I closed the lid.

'Now we'll see about the jewel,' I say. I lean over close to the candle and look into her eyes. We are all laughing, but she is visibly shaken. The count and his men are up and about, still staggering, laughing.

The count's hand falls unerringly to the sword on his belt. Like all royal fops he considers himself the finest swordsman in the land, trained by Sir So-and-so, the great master. This makes me go into another laughing fit.

Her voice is trembling. 'You, a thief, an assassin, you must be mad to tell me here. The count is the finest swordsman in the world. Haroud will be here any moment. You'll never escape.'

Her eyes have tears in them. In fact, her eyes are tears. They seem to melt. She supposes herself irresistible. The princess in her tower and all that. She is rather pretty, in the manner of a tailor's mannequin, her expression rigid, her face wooden. By God, they are all mannequins. I could tell you about gypsy girls, dancers, beggars, with bodies like ripe fruit, but here they are all mannequins, swiveling slowly to meet me.

I catch my breath. Jewels are bursting out all over them, glistening, gleaming. Suddenly the jewels change into flowers. Flower-sprouting mannequins wheeling across the floor toward me with swords coming out of their scabbards. I am laughing hysterically. Who has drugged the drinks? I must remember.

Tonight. Earlier tonight. Can it have only been an hour or two ago? I remember the subtlety of the interplay. The princess, flushed, avoiding my eyes, yet chasing my eyes; the count, furious, certain something was wrong, yet unaware of the nature of his suspicions.

'But my lady, naturally Haroud will be here for the banquet. Now that the king and his knights are called away by duty to the side of his ailing brother (some chess maneuvering, I suspected, by the Kang), Haroud's concern for your safety has been greatly increased. In fact, he has gone to the weaponsmith for a set of new hand darts, the tips of which he will dip in exotic poisons, and wear hidden in his sleeves to the banquet.

'Of course, if he should be late, I shall be sitting across from you at the table, in his place, to guard your royal personage with my very heart and soul.'

I gave her an expression to suggest that some very romantic meaning was hidden beneath my servile chatter, and at the same time I tried to keep track of the count He didn't like the way the dice were falling. He was pacing up and down behind her, nervous as a fox.

'I can't imagine the faithful Haroud disappearing without word, an hour or so before a royal banquet. His position is at the princess's side, always at her side at any occasion such as this.'

I made a wry face to the princess, as though we young people had to humor the conservative fears of the older generation.

'I am sure he will be here quite soon,' I said, 'and doubtless Haroud wonders who could possibly stand up to yourself, who is indeed, if what I've heard is true, one of the finest swordsmen in the world.'

'You have heard wrong!' The Count. 'I am *the* finest swordsman in the world, as those who put it to the test would tell you, if they were alive to do so.'

'You'll leave, my lady, count, we must all prepare ourselves, and if the count will see you to your quarters, I will change and come to your service within the hour. And as for

your apprehensions, my dear count, surely no one would be so foolish as to put your powers to the test.'

As I turned and walked away, the count called after me, 'One might be so unfortunate as to have no choice in the matter.'

As soon as I was out of sight, I doubled back into the royal kitchen, where I inspected the wine.

Of course. It was I who drugged the wine. Poison was impossible, because I would have to drink it with the rest. I chose for the occasion, not without a certain humor, the magical vision-producing mushroom of the master of the woods. When I had lived with the great master, my main chores had been the gathering and preparation of these and other vision-producing drugs of the area. And furthermore, under the master's guidance, I had taken them many times before. I felt certain I could function clearly under the influence of what would be to a beginner a totally disorienting amount.

What irony that I, a juggler and trickster of the road, should fail to pay due honor to the goddess to whom I had dedicated my entire life, Lady Luck.

And so Luck turned her face away, and as with a juggler's hand I slipped that packet from my cloak and into the wine, before the very eyes of all the cooks and cooks' assistants. I looked up into the cold eyes of the count. Had he seen the ferret quick movement of my hand? I doubted that. And yet, apparently harboring suspicions, he had followed me, only to find me hovering over the wine – most suspicious.

'Just checking the wine, my friend, can't be too careful.'

'Agreed,' he answered, 'and now with duty so well disposed of, I see no reason we shouldn't dispose of a flagon or two between us, to sort of . . . toast our dedication to caution.'

It was no use protesting; I am sure if I had he and one or two of his men would have held back from drinking. Of course I had intended to drink some, but very little. Now here it was, a whole flagon, so much, almost too much I feared Oh well, I couldn't slight the goddess twice in one night.

'To our lady of the road, moon sister,' I said, 'the goddess of chance and inspiration, she who upholds the changing of the seasons and of the fortunes of men.'

We downed the flagons The cooks' assistants scurried

about us like frantic ants, and the aroma of rich foods perfumed the air.

'And now,' he said, 'I should like to propose a toast.' He filled the flagons.

'To her sister, the queen of reason and logic. She who upholds the order and tradition of the high houses of rulership and thwarts the thief who creeps in the night, to murder and steal, among the righteous.'

Again we downed the flagons The banquet was to begin in half an hour, whereas the effects of the drug should not begin to be felt for at least an hour or so.

He smiled a cold smile. His thin aristocratic nose slightly wrinkled, as though he sensed something indefinably out of tune with the wine.

'A rather dull year,' he minced, as though I were anxiously awaiting his approval in order to enjoy the wine I had just drunk.

'Just so,' I answered. 'I feel in my bones, however, that few past years will seem more than shadows compared with the splendor of tonight's banquet; if you will excuse me, until then.'

I turned and walked away in the proud smooth gait of the ancients.

No, no, that's wrong It's not I who walks thus. Something is pushing its way up into my mind. Something strong. Not I, in that gait.

He's coming like fire onto wood.

My mind splitting into fragments. Then. Now Then.

Now. I must get back into the now before it's too late. Now. Forever now.

They are floating toward me, still giggling, swords out. The princess is shrinking back in her chair, hysterically crying out a stream of grotesque commands such as, 'To my side, brave count, defend my honor with your very life, oh noble swordsman. Take heart, he is a coward and a thief'

Artificial even in terror. They're all mannequins to the core, but they're not sprouting flowers any more.

Too bad. I take another drink of wine. No. That's wrong. No more wine.

Now. Now.

I twist into the attack, a leaf sucked into the eye of the tornado. Launching my body sideways into the air, I feel a sword slither past me. I hear myself laughing as if from the top of a distant mountain. So far away. So far away.

I claw at the face, hear the tearing of flesh, land turning, twisting, spinning. Three more to go. I dance among their blades like a flame, until, all at once I launch the full force of my attack, a sudden avalanche of blows.

As they fall, broken and dying, I have already turned upon the count.

The greatest swordsman in the world has backed off, into a corner, which he defends trembling in fear, no doubt for the princess' royal honor.

I don't waste words, his time has come and passed

I fix my eyes on him and begin to open the funnel into my mind. He is hurled back against the wall and pinned there, twitching like a fish out of water, until I look away. He slumps to the floor, and I turn from him. I need look upon his arrogant form no more.

I lean over close to the candle. I lean over close to the candle. Over and over from a thousand different angles, slowly revolving, tipping down, down to the light. I look in and in. I see the light within the light.

Her mouth is an 'O' frozen and round as if she has just said something. She has not. I reach for the jewel. I reach for the jewel. Slowly; things are slow now. We are under water. We drift towards each other, the ruby and I. It glows and gleams as big as a grapefruit, as pure as spring, as red and sparkling as blood, alive and working. It aches for my hand. I reach, I reach, I reach . . .

He has come. The ancient Kang of evil has come to break my bones and eat my flesh.

We stand frozen across the room, I with my hand stretched out reaching for the ruby. Neither of us dares to move, until we are sure of the distance, the place, the time. Neither of us dares to make a mistake. He would smile if he could. He won't make a mistake.

Suddenly we whirl and flap together like two wild birds in the center of the room. We fall apart and freeze again. He is crouched like a cat. I am standing straight like a great strong fighting crane. My hands are like two beaks, and his are like two claws. I am aware of a warm gush of blood on my forehead.

I can feel his mind searching about for Abdul, but not thinking to try inside the cigarette box in my pocket.

Inside the box, Abdul sleeps curled up like smoke He dreams of himself lying on the beach. And for Abdul, trapped in my pocket, dreams are the only reality.

Dream. Dream.

They have drugged the drinks. They begin to laugh over and over. They never stop. They are fragments, myriad fragments of a thing. They drift in space, each one with the same laugh over and over. Heavily lidded eyes, sleepy distant laughter, drift, drift.

Yet I will awake. I will awake. I will . . .

Awake!

He has come to save me. The great and fatherly shining master of the forest stands as noble as a statue, without fear, without movement, and yet holding, forcing, soothing the insatiable evil Kang.

From the Kang begins to emanate the black. From the master emanates the white. I catch my breath. I dare not move. From the Kang begins to emanate the red. From the master the blue. And now the colors begin to do a thing together in the center of the room. The ruby shines and glimmers, aching to whirl into the flowing colors. I notice a strange bubbling and miring in my stomach. I can't think; they have drugged the drinks. I am drifting under, into my self.

Now.

I am awake at last. My laughter freezes the Kang and the master. They are like dolls that represent the two things of everything, but I am the third, and the one with the two within. I think finally all three of us are aware of our roles in this mystery play.

Oh well, I can use them in here. I reach over, squish them together, roll them up and stick them inside of me. Then I take the ruby and become at the beach.

Light is manifested from within the sand, from within the stone. From within the everything.

I hold my stone out for the eyes of the gods, and they appear about me in the sand.

They are all here, at last. I show them the pretty stone with the light. (How different from the light within the all?) A pretty bubble. Then we all see poor Abdul frozen, holding a dagger, scowling at the sand

All of the gods are laughing. But now Yahweh and Pan are beginning to quarrel again. And I notice with affectionate eyes, as our lady of the night, her beautiful dusty gypsy soul winking at me, begins to caress the stern Lord Buddha in a manner certain to cause him more suffering and release from suffering, of which I am certain he has had enough.

Oh well, the gods are a bother, but I can use them in here. I reach over and squish them all together, roll them up and stick them inside of me, where they dwindle, fade, go away. Everyone goes away. Everything goes away. All my desires have become shadows, and finally disappeared. I exist. All alone. Wait a moment. One thing lingers. One little desire. Even here where everyone is the same, there is somehow a difference. A tendency, a nature perhaps. Not a desire, an aspect. The aspect of the god who is the aspect of the man, or is it vice versa. I see. It is both ways at once. All ways at once. It is not we, or I, but both ways at once. Better to say, neither of us exists. Just existence, yet existence has aspects.

I am my aspect. Aspect is action. I act. Everything comes together for one moment which is the now.

Now . . .

All over the world balls begin to rise into the air and dance up and down, myriads of sparkling colors, laughing, winking at the sun, and I am the juggler of a thousand, a million, a billion balls.

And then, now moves on, nothing left. Empty. Something in my hand, a shiny stone.

I toss the ruby glitteringly seaward. I see it settle, glowing, under wave after wave after wave. I grow weary. I think it is time to sleep.

I take out the cigarette box and open it. Way down the beach, I see Abdul stabbing senselessly into the sand until his passions are eased. He looks about him in bewilderment. He sees me, I think, but I am different now. He goes away. Everything goes away.

I sleep. I drift. I wander among them through narrow streets where we are packed shoulder to shoulder. The drinks are all drugged and we all drink deeply. We forget. We forget.

Many stare from the windows here, but they stare at one thing. Then, in a myriad of fragments, the thing happens. Each way it happens, it happens, but only once.

Here there are many doors to one house, and all of us coming in and out, too much to keep track.

My mind is drifting all ways at once, in a confusion of colors.

A slow explosion of stars.

I lean over close to the candle and look anxiously into her eyes for some sign. Emeralds are dancing in my dreams, emeralds are shining from my eyes. I am drowning in emeralds and I don't know why.

THE WARLORD OF SATURN'S MOONS

ELEANOR ARNASON

Here I am, a silver-haired maiden lady of thirty-five, a feeder of stray cats, a window-ledge gardener, well on my way to the African violet and antimacassar stage. I can see myself at fifty, fat and a little crazy, making cucumber sandwiches for tea, and I view my future with mixed feelings. Whatever became of my childhood ambitions: joining the space patrol; winning a gold medal at the olympics; climbing Mount Everest alone in my bathing suit, sustained only by my indomitable will and strange psychic arts learned from Hindu mystics? The saddest words of tongue or pen are something-or-other that might have been, I think. I light up a cigar and settle down to write another chapter of *The Warlord of Saturn's Moons*. A filthy habit you say, though I'm not sure if you're referring to smoking cigars or writing science fiction. True, I reply, but both activities are pleasurable, and we maiden ladies lead lives that are notoriously short on pleasure.

So back I go to the domes of Titan and my red-headed heroine deathraying down the warlord's minions. Ah, the smell of burning flesh, the spectacle of blackened bodies collapsing. Even on paper it gets a lot of hostility out of you, so that your nights aren't troubled by dreams of murder. Terribly unrestful, those midnight slaughters and waking shaking in the darkness, your hands still feeling pressure from grabbing the victim or fighting off the murderer.

Another escape! In a power-sledge, my heroine races

across Titan's methane snow, and I go and make myself tea. There's a paper on the kitchen table, waiting to tell me all about yesterday's arsons, rapes and bloody murders. Quickly I stuff it into the garbage pail. Outside, the sky is hazy. Another high-pollution day, I think. I can see incinerator smoke rising from the apartment building across the street, which means there's no air alert yet. Unless, of course, they're breaking the law over there. I fling open a cabinet and survey the array of teas. Earl Grey? I ponder, or Assam? Gunpowder? Jasmine? Gen Mai Cha? Or possibly a herb tea: sassafras, mint, Irish moss or mu. Deciding on Assam, I put water on, then go back to write an exciting chase through the icy Titanian mountains. A pursuer's sledge goes over a precipice and, as my heroine hears his long shriek on her radio, my tea kettle starts shrieking. I hurry into the kitchen. Now I go through the tea-making ceremony: pouring boiling water into the pot, sloshing the water around and pouring it out, measuring the tea in, pouring more boiling water on top of the tea. All the while my mind is with my heroine, smiling grimly as she pilots the power-sledge between bare cliffs. Above her in the dark sky is the huge crescent of Saturn, a shining white line slashing across it – the famous Rings. While the tea steeps, I wipe off a counter and wash a couple of mugs. I resist a sudden impulse to pull the newspaper out from among the used tea leaves and orange peelings. I already know what's in it The Detroit murder count will exceed 1,000 again this year; the war in Thailand is going strong; most of Europe is out on strike. I'm far better off on Titan with my heroine, who is better able to deal with her problems than I am to deal with mine A deadly shot, she has also learned strange psychic arts from Hindu mystics, which give her great strength, endurance, mental alertness and a naturally pleasant body odor. I wipe my hands and look at them, noticing the bitten fingernails, the torn cuticles. My heroine's long, slender, strong hands have two-inch nails filed to a point and covered with a plastic paint that makes them virtually unbreakable. When necessary, she uses them as claws. Her cuticles, of course, are in perfect condition.

I pour myself a cup of tea and return to the story. Now my heroine is heading for the mountain hideout where her partner waits: a tall, thin, dour fellow with one shining steel prosthetic hand. She doesn't know his name and she suspects he himself may have forgotten it. He insists on being called

409, his number on the prison asteroid from which he has escaped. She drives as quickly as she dares, thinking of his long face, burned almost black by years of strong radiation on Mars and in space, so the white webbing of scars on its right side shows up clearly. His eyes are grey, so pale they seem almost colorless. As I write about 409, I find myself stirred by the same passion that stirs my heroine. I begin to feel uneasy, so I stop and drink some tea I can see I'm going to have trouble with 409. It's never wise to get too involved with one's characters Besides, I'm not his type. I imagine the way he'd look at me, indifference evident on his dark, scarred face. I could, of course, kill him off. My heroine would then spend the rest of the story avenging him, though she'd never get to the real murderer – me. But this solution, while popular among writers, is unfair.

I go into the kitchen, extract a carrot from a bunch in the icebox, clean it and eat it. After that, I write the heroine's reunion with 409. Neither of them is demonstrative. They greet each other with apparent indifference and retire to bed. I skip the next scene How can I watch that red-headed hussy in bed with the man I'm beginning to love? I continue the story at the moment when their alarm bell rings, and they awake to find the warlord's rocket planes have landed all around their hideout A desperate situation! 409 suggests that he make a run for it in their rocket plane. While the warlord's minions pursue him, my heroine can sneak away in the power-sledge. The plan has little chance of success, but they can think of none better. They bid farewell to one another, and my heroine goes to wait in the sledge for the signal telling her 409 has taken off. As she waits, smoking a cigar, she thinks of what little she knows about 409. He was a fighter pilot in the war against the Martian colony and was shot down and captured. While in prison something happened to him that he either can't remember or refuses to talk about, and, when the war ended and he was released, he became a criminal. As for herself, she had been an ordinary sharpshooter and student of Hindu mysticism, a follower of Swami Bluestone of the Brooklyn Vedic Temple and Rifle Range. Then she discovered by accident the warlord's plot to overthrow the government of Titan, the only one of Saturn's satellites not under his control. With her information about the plot, the government may still be saved She has to get to Titan City with the microfilm dot!

The alarm bell rings, and she feels the ground shake as

409's plane takes off. Unfortunately I'm writing the story from my heroine's point of view. I want to describe 409 blasting off, the warlord's rocket planes taking off after him, chasing him as he flies through the narrow, twisting valleys, the planes' rockets flaring red in the valley shadows and missiles exploding into yellow fireballs. All through this, of course, 409's scarred face remains tranquil and his hands move quickly and surely over the plane's controls. His steel prosthetic hand gleams in the dim light from the dials. But I can't put this in the story, since my heroine sees none of it as she slides off in the opposite direction, down a narrow trail hidden by overhanging cliffs.

I am beginning to feel tense, I don't know why. Possibly 409's dilemma is disturbing me. He's certainly in danger. In any case, my tea is cold. I turn on the radio, hoping for some relaxing rock music and go to get more tea. But it's twenty to the hour, time for the news, and I get the weekend body count: two men found dead in suspected westside dope house, naked body of woman dragged out of Detroit River. I hurry back and switch to a country music station. On it, someone's singing about how he intends to leave the big city and go back down south. As I go back into the kitchen, I think:

Carry me back to Titan.
That's where I want to be.
I want to repose
On the methane snows
At the edge of a frozen sea.

I pour out the old tea and refill the cup with tea that's hot.

The radio begins to make that awful beepity-beep-beepity sound that warns you the news is coming up. I switch back to the rock station, where the news is now over. I'm safe for another fifty-five minutes, unless there's a special news flash to announce a five-car pile-up or an especially ghastly murder.

The plan works! For my heroine, at least. She doesn't know yet if 409 got away. She speeds off unpursued. The power-sledge's heating system doesn't quite keep her warm, and the landscape around her is forbidding: bare cliffs and narrow valleys full of methane snow, overhead the dark blue sky. Saturn has set, and the tiny sun is rising, though she can't see it yet. On the high mountains the ice fields

begin to glitter with its light. On she races, remembering how she met 409 in the slums of The Cup on Ganymede, as she fled the warlord's assassins. She remembers being cornered with no hope of escape. Then behind the two assassins a tall figure appeared and the shining steel hand smashed down on the back of one assassin's head. As the other assassin turned, he got the hand across his face. A moment or two more, and both the assassins were on the ground, unconscious. Then she saw 409's twisted grin for the first time and his colorless eyes appraising her.

There I go, I think, getting all heated up over 409. The radio is beginning to bother me, so I shut it off and re-light my cigar. I find myself wishing that men like 409 really existed. Increasingly in recent years, I've found real men boring. Is it possible, as some scientists argue, that the Y chromosome produces an inferior human being? There certainly seem to be far fewer interesting men than interesting women But theories arguing that one kind of human being is naturally inferior make me anxious. I feel my throat muscles tightening and the familiar tense, numb feeling spreading across my face and my upper back. Quickly I return to my story.

Now out on the snowy plain, my heroine can see the transparent domes of Titan City ahead of her, shining in the pale sunlight. Inside the domes the famous pastel towers rise, their windows reflecting the sun. Her power-sledge speeds down the road, through the drifts that half cover it. Snow sprays up on either side of the sledge, so my heroine has trouble seeing to the left and right. As a result, it's some time before she sees the power-sledges coming up behind her on the right. At the same moment that she looks over and sees them, their sleek silver bodies shining in the sunlight and snow-sprays shooting up around them, her radio begins to go beep-beep-beep. She flicks it on. The voice of Janos Black, the warlord's chief agent on Titan, harsh and slurred by a thick Martian accent, tells her the bad news: 409's plane has been shot down. He ejected before it crashed. Even now the warlord's men are going after the ejection capsule, which is high on a cliff, wedged between a rock spire and the cliff wall. Janos offers her a trade: 409 for the microdot. But Janos may well be lying; 409 may have gotten away or else been blown up. She feels a sudden constriction of her throat at the thought of 409 dead. She flicks off the radio and pushes the power-sledge up to top speed.

She realizes as she does so that 409 is unlikely to fare well if Janos gets ahold of him. Janos' wife and children died of thirst after the great Martian network of pipelines was blown apart by Earther bombs, and Janos knows that 409 was a pilot in the Farther expeditionary force.

I write another exciting chase, this one across the snowy plain toward the pink, green, blue and yellow towers of Titan City. The warlord's power-sledges are gaining. Their rockets hit all around my heroine's sledge, and fire and black smoke erupt out of the snow. Swearing in a low monotone, she swings the sledge back and forth in a zig-zag evasive pattern.

I stop to puff on my cigar and discover it's gone out again. My tea is cold. But the story's beginning at last to interest me. I keep on writing.

As my heroine approaches the entrance to Titan City, she's still a short distance ahead of her pursuers. Her radio beeps. It's Janos Black again. He tells her his men have gotten to the ejection capsule and are lowering it down the cliff. Any minute now, they'll have it down where they can open it and get 409 out.

Ignoring Janos, she concentrates on slowing her sledge and bringing it through the city's outer gate into the airlock. A moment or two later, she's safe. But what about 409?

Frankly, I don't know. I stand and stretch, decide to take a bath, and go to turn the water on. The air pollution must be worse than I originally thought. I have the dopey feeling I get on the days when the pollution is really bad. I look out the window. Dark grey smoke is still coming out of the chimneys across the street. Maybe I should call the Air Control number (dial AIR-CARE) and complain But it takes a peculiar kind of person to keep on being public-spirited after it becomes obvious it's futile. I decide to put off calling Air Control and water my plants instead. Every bit of oxygen helps, I think. I check the bathtub – it's not yet half-full and go back to writing After a couple of transitional paragraphs, my heroine finds herself in the antechamber to the Titan Council's meeting room. There is a man there, standing with his back to her. He's tall and slender, and his long hair is a shade between blond and grey. He turns and she recognizes the pale, delicate-looking face. This is Michael Stelladoro, the warlord of Saturn's moons. His eyes, she notices, are as blue as cornflowers and he has a delightful smile. He congratulates her on escaping his power-

sledges, then tells her that his men have gotten 409 out of the ejection capsule. He is still alive and as far as they can determine uninjured. They have given 409 a shot of Sophamine. At this my heroine gasps with horror. Sophamine, she knows, is an extremely powerful tranquilizer used to control schizophrenia. One dose is enough to make most people dependent on it, and withdrawal takes the form of a nightmarish psychotic fugue. The warlord smiles his delightful smile and turns on the radio he has clipped to his belt A moment later my heroine hears 409's voice telling her that he has in fact been captured. He sounds calm and completely uninterested in his situation. That, she knows, is the Sophamine. It hasn't affected his perception of reality. He knows where he is and what is likely to happen to him, but he simply doesn't care. When the Sophamine wears off, all the suppressed emotions will well up, so intense that the only way he'll be able to deal with them will be to go insane, temporarily at least.

The warlord tells her he regrets having to use the Sophamine, but he was certain that 409 would refuse to talk unless he was either drugged or tortured, and there simply wasn't enough time to torture him.

'You fiend!' my heroine cries.

The warlord smiles again, as delightfully as before, and says if she gives the microdot to the Titan Council, he will turn 409 over to Janos Black, who will attempt to avenge on him all the atrocities committed by the Earthers on Mars.

What can she do? As she wonders, the door to the meeting room opens, and she is asked to come in. For a moment, she thinks of asking the Titanians to arrest the warlord. Almost as if he's read her mind, he tells her there's no point in asking the Titanians to arrest him. He has diplomatic immunity and a warfleet waiting for him to return.

She turns to go into the meeting room. 'I'll tell Janos the good news,' the warlord says softly and turns his radio on.

She hesitates, then thinks, a man this evil must be stopped, no matter what the cost. She goes into the meeting room.

I remember the bath water, leap up and run into the bathroom. The tub is brim-full and about to overflow. I turn off the tap, let out some of the water, and start to undress. After I climb into the tub, I wonder how I'm going to get 409 out of the mess he's in Something will occur to me. I grab the bar of soap floating past my right knee.

After bathing, I put on a pink and silver muumuu and

make a fresh pot of tea. Cleanliness is next to godliness, I think as I sit down to write.

My heroine tells her story to the Titan Council and produces the microdot. On it is the warlord's plan for taking over the government of Titan and a list of all the Titanian officials he has subverted. The president of the council thanks her kindly and tells her that they already have a copy of the microdot, obtained for them by an agent of theirs who has infiltrated the warlord's organization. 'Oh no! Oh no!' my heroine cries. Startled, the president asks her what's wrong. She explains that she has sacrificed her partner, her love to bring them the information they already had. 'Rest easy,' the president says. 'Our agent is none other than Janos Black. He won't harm 409.'

Thinking of Janos' family dying of thirst in an isolated settlement, my heroine feels none too sure of this. But there's nothing left for her to do except hope.

After that, I describe her waiting in Titan City for news of 409, wandering restlessly through the famous gardens, barely noticing the beds of Martian sandflowers, the blossoming magnolia trees, the pools full of enormous silver carp. Since the warlord now knows that the Titan Council knows about his schemes, the council moves quickly to arrest the officials he's subverted. The newscasts are full of scandalous revelations, and the warlord leaves Titan for his home base on Tethys, another one of Saturn's moons. My heroine pays no attention to the newscasts or to the excited conversations going on all around her. She thinks of the trip she and 409 made from Ganymede and Titan in a stolen moon-hopper, remembering 409's hands on the ship's controls, the way he moved in zero-G, his colorless eyes and his infrequent, twisted smile. Cornball, I think, but leave the passage in. I enjoy thinking about 409 as much as my heroine does.

After two days, Janos Black arrives in a police plane. 409 is with him. Janos comes to see my heroine to bring her the news of their arrival. He's a tall man with a broad chest and spindly arms and legs. His face is ruddy and Slavic, and his hair is prematurely white. He tells her that he kept 409 prisoner in the warlord's secret headquarters in the Titanian mountains till the Titanian police moved in and arrested everybody.

'Then he's all right,' she cries joyfully.

Janos shakes his head.

'Why not?'

'The Sophamine,' Janos explains. 'When it wore off, he got hit with the full force of all his repressed feelings, especially, I think, the feelings he had about the war on Mars. Think of all that anger and terror and horror and guilt flooding into his conscious mind. He tried to kill himself. We stopped him, and he almost killed a couple of us in the process. By we I mean myself and the warlord's men; this happened before the police moved in We had to give him another shot of Sophamine He's still full of the stuff From what I've heard, the doctors want to keep giving it to him. They think the first shot of Sophamine he got destroyed his old system of dealing with his more dangerous emotions, which are now overwhelming him. The doctors say on Sophamine he can function more or less normally. Off it, they think he'll be permanently insane.'

'You planned this!' she cries.

Janos shakes his head. 'The warlord gave the order, miss. I only obeyed it. But I didn't mind this time I didn't mind.'

I stop to drink some tea. Then I write the final scene in the chapter: my heroine's meeting with 409. He's waiting for her in a room at the Titan City Hospital. The room is dark. He sits by the window looking out at the tall towers blazing with light and at the dome above them, which reflects the towers' light so it's impossible to look through it at the sky. She can see his dark shape and the red tip of the cigar he smokes.

'Do you mind if I turn on the lights?' she asks.

'No.'

She finds the button and presses it. The ceiling begins to glow. She looks at 409. He lounges in his chair, his feet up on a table. She realizes it's the first time she's seen him look really relaxed. Before this, he's always seemed tense, even when asleep.

'How are you?' she asks.

'Fine.' His voice sounds tranquil and indifferent.

She can't think of anything to say. He looks at her, his dark, scarred face expressionless. Finally he says, 'Don't let it bother you. I feel fine.' He pauses. She still can't think of anything to say. He continues. 'The pigs don't want me for anything here on Titan. I think I'll be able to stay.'

'What're you going to do here?'

'Work, I guess. The doctors say I can hold down a job if I keep taking Sophamine.' He draws on the cigar, so the tip glows red, then blows out the smoke. He's looking away

from her at the towers outside the window. She begins weeping. He looks back at her. 'I'm all right. Believe me, I feel fine.'

But she can't stop weeping.

Enough for today, I think and put down my pencil. Tomorrow, I'll figure out a way to get 409 off Sophamine. Where there's life there's hope and so forth, I tell myself.

THE SECRET OF HOLMAN HUNT AND THE CRUDE DEATH RATE

BRIAN W. ALDISS

1980 saw the dawn of a new era for mankind – an era of hope and salvation, when it became possible for the first time for a human being to be truly human! Not only was it the year the world economy started to recover, the worst of the famine period being over, and the year those brave British mountaineers climbed Everest blindfold. It was also the year I found a new use for the human mind.

To put it as simply as possible, I used what I call infra-externality: a form of stillness in spatial dimension which allows the mind fullest range – mind being formed of the brain/memory components, and therefore in part time-functional; full function is greatest when movement is least. This principle I first stumbled upon when studying a chronologically arranged collection of 74 impersonations of the American film actor, James Cagney. Examining these impersonations, which range from the nineteen-thirties to the nineteen-seventies, I became aware of how vocal range has fluctuated during this half-century. Here was a vital clue to the reality-value of different periods, suggesting that the external world is itself composed of fluctuating sense-impressions.

What I needed for corroboration was similar data from an earlier period, preferably from a subject who, like James

Cagney, made no attempt to diagnose or master the elements of his contemporary environment.

The evidence I required arrived from what may perhaps be regarded at first as an unlikely source, in the sketches, watercolours and chalks of the Pre-Raphaelite painter, William Holman Hunt. It may be helpful to the reader to see some of this data himself. The following figures are in centimeters:

Apple Harvest, Ragaz	Pencil	39 x 44 2
Study of Dr. Bloxam [1]	Chalk	19.7 x 23.2
The Pearl	Silverpoint	44.5 x 28
Study of Drapery [2]	Black chalk	24.2 x 22
Christ Among the Doctors	Watercolour	64.8 x 125 7
The Nile Postman	Watercolour	17.2 x 24.8
View of Corfu	Watercolour	17 x 24.7
Sketches on Magdalen Tower [1]	Watercolour	24.4 x 34 3
Hilary as a Baby	Silverpoint	24.8 x 34.3
Nude study: Annie Miller's Thighs [2]	Indian Ink	24.2 x 28
Study of a Candlestick with Flowers [2]	Pencil	35.5 x 25 4

1: studies for the oil painting May Morning on Magdalen Tower
2: studies for the oil painting The Lady of Shalot

There is no need to prolong the list. The figures cannot be disputed: matched against the chronology of Hunt's life they relate well to a cyclic waning of universal entropic dynamism. I was greatly helped at this stage by the cooperation of Professor Benedict Nightwind, the specialist in nineteenth century economic history. We matched birth/death figures for England and Wales over six decades, balancing them against the tell-tale ratio indicated by Rostow some years ago - between the figures for houses and dwellings erected in Europe and the numbers of emigrants from Europe to North America during the equivalent period.

Gradually we built up a scheme which at first seemed pure fantasy, it indicated clearly enough the complete fallaciousness of our old ideas about the relationship between mind and matter. To clarify by analogy: just as

Heat Source + Frying Pan + Egg + Fat = Fried Egg

was hitherto supposed to represent a natural progression, both in terms of temporal flow and cause and effect, we now understand that the very converse is the natural progression. It is the demand for the fried egg that activates the heat source. The fried egg we eat lies at the apex of a pyramid of technological endeavour called into being to provide the fried egg. This, at bottom, is what the second Industrial Revolution is all about. And so with the external world.

It will immediately be seen to what further conclusion I was led. The brain/memory system operates best when not in pursuit of its own chimerae From this observation has developed my system of infra-externality.

But a more alarming fact also emerged. If a brain/memory system has influence - weak, but nevertheless measurable under our new scales – over externality, then clearly the more plentiful the brain/memory systems, the greater their influence. The unit of measurement of this influence is the *pom*, after Pomona, the Roman goddess of fruitfulness. Numerous tables already calibrated showed a high pom-effect – although naturally the compilers of these tables were compiling their data with other intentions in mind, being unaware of differing reality-values. Here is one such table, showing alterations in the Crude Death Rate expressed in percentages for six developing countries over five decades:

Country	1940	1950	1960	1970	1980
Mexico	23 2	16.2	11.4	9 5	7.1*
Costa Rica	17.3	12.2	8 6	6 9	5.1
Chile	21.6	15.0	11.9	11.1*	7.7
Venezuela	16.6	10.9	8.0	4.3	3.2
Singapore	20.9	12.0	6.3	4.2	2.9
Japan	16.8	10.9	7.6	3.7	1.8

*These figures would doubtless be appreciably lower, were it not for the war in Mexico and the earthquake in Chile

The high pom-effect revealed here is manifested, in the main, by brain/memory systems in agitated motion, which induces a consequential weakening in the reality principle. Eventually, the external world may be expected to disappear entirely, just as sleep tends to evaporate from bedrooms within audible distance of airports and motorways. This weakening, to my mind, entirely accounts for the disappear-

ance of the planets Mercury and Venus at 0259 hours GMT on Monday 28th July 1982 - the abstruse new theory of celestial gravitation is nothing to the case.

What calamity will next befall us if many millions more do not adopt my system of infra-externality? Beyond assuring ourselves that whatever happens will be the fault of those too idle or wicked to heed warnings, we must admit that it is useless to speculate. But perhaps even the two brief tables shown here may give us a clue to catastrophes in store. Both tables show the brain/memory system's tendency to *diminish* things. We must not suppose that Dr Bloxam 'really' measured only 19.7 x 23.2, that a postman on the Nile was 'really' of no greater stature than 17.2 x 24 8; or even that Annie Miller's thighs could 'really' be accommodated in a space of 24.2 x 28; the Victorians, as far as all medical evidence shows, were of approximately our dimensions. Nevertheless, by such reductive thinking as the restless Hunt's, a real diminution was set in process as Nature imitated Art (which is, incidentally, a Victorian perception and one that immediately foreshadows my own discoveries).

When we turn to the second table, the one showing the Crude Death Rate, we are struck by the same process of diminishment, here at work in different ontological territory. A simple extension of the figures into the future is sufficient to prove that death rates in all of the listed countries except Mexico and Chile will have reached zero by the year 1995 and that Mexico and Chile will probably have reached zero by 2000. *The process is a continuous one until people adopt my famous infra-externality method*. By the year 2005, all six countries (and of course many more besides) will have a minus quantity death rate.

What are we to do with all these resurrected bodies when they appear from their graves to reproach us? To many of my followers, this coming event represents The End of The World (or the Last Trump, which was a Biblical way of representing the eventual complete collapse of external reality). I tell them otherwise. I tell them that these resurrected millions are the very people we need to further our cause. To them, who have undergone the process of death, the principles of stillness in spatial dimension upon which my amazing system relies will be readily apparent.

All of them will join – as you can, today – in the Campaign for Scientific Infra-Externality (C.S.I.E.). Certainly, many unenlightened people may object at first to the multi-

tudes of semi-decomposed Mexicans and Costa Ricans squatting among them, but conviction will ultimately triumph. The world will be saved. Everyone, everywhere, will be sitting still. And we will, in addition, get Mercury and Venus back.

That victory will be mine! But it can be yours too. It is still not too late to join C.S.I.E. Put your brain/memory system at my service. Send me five pounds immediately. You will receive in return a fifty-page brochure entitled, 'Sit and Conquer! Meditate Your Way to Mastery!', containing preliminary details of my methods, a signed certificate to frame, a mat to sit on (inflatable), and a 3D photograph of Holman-Hunt sitting on the shores of the Dead Sea. Later, men from our organisation will call on you.

And this is only the beginning. The secrets of the ages could be yours From my personal experience I know that once you have gained control of yourself, you can control the world!

MISS SUBWAYS

GWYNETH CRAVENS

The election of Miss Subways is one of the New York Transit Authority's most long-standing and best-loved traditions. Photographs of the nominees are posted on subway advertising cards. The general public are invited to choose their favorite and mail in their ballots. From these ballots Miss Subways is chosen, and as our own subway Beauty Queen her image brings glamor and freshness to the metropolis.

– T.A. publicity release

What is the new, permanent Miss Subways like?

An accomplished punsteress, she is willing to accept modeling assignments and fly to Puerto Rico frequently. She is not engaged (so there's no need to swoon, girls). She has golden hair that hangs to her ivory hips, and her lips are as red as rowan berries.

She likes the small, ordinary things of everyday life for their innate quality of blandness. Affection, terror, and abstract concepts are scrupulously avoided, except during transit strikes. Hobbies: tatting, collecting, dismissing.

What do you think of safety on the subways?

'The violet lights, the whale that washed up in the tunnel, the Dyre Avenue Express . . . these things are important and must be looked into. I express a healthy concern. I make a point of purchasing combs, perfumes, chewing gum, and candies from subway vending machines.'

Describe your ideal man

'He gets out of his Lear jet . . . his boot heels are filled with cocaine. Loose, dark hair . . . a willingness to die at the gates of hell. Don't tell my women's group!'

Do you subscribe to the Steady-State Theory of the universe?

'No. In fact, we who believe in the expanding universe have a motto: "There's always room for more!" Anyway, in a steady-state universe, rapid transit would not be feasible.'

Miss Subways spends a lot of time underground, contemplating the phenomenology of the subways – the diminishing perspectives, the ineluctable girders, the mystery of the electrified third rail running like fear through the heart of the city.

On these tours she is often accompanied by one or the other of her famous escorts Though both are novice cosmologists, they know nothing about the presence of the other. Miss Subways chuckles over a favorite anecdote: 'Once, in the middle of the night, Friend A phoned while Friend B was with me. Friend A had just rung up to ask me how old I thought the universe was. Quickly, I said, "Twelve billion years," which is what Friend B had just told me. Later, after a decent interval, Friend B told me that he hadn't been honest with me, that there were really three different ways of figuring the age of the universe, three different geometries, and, frankly, he believed in the one that put the age of the universe at sixteen billion years. The next day I look in the *Guinness Book of Records*. It says, "Eighteen billion years." *Men!*'

Miss Subways writes a letter to the President expressing a favorable stance on the demonetization of nickel. The letter somehow finds its way into *The New York Times* and she gets into big trouble with the Transit Authority. She pleads health reasons, an unsympathetic nervous system. The T.A. relents, and renews her posters, and she signs an agreement to remain silent concerning the nonconservation of parity.

'I am hopelessly female,' she states in an interview in *Ms* magazine. 'I admit I resorted to age-old means of trickery to wriggle out of a tight spot, but I had to think of my image, didn't I?'

How does it all end?

An article in the *Village Voice* imparts the distressing news that 'her facade of veneer is cracking at last'.

A plateau is finally reached, the energy in a closed system is constant, irrespective. Miss Subways frequents the abandoned station at 91st and Broadway, leaning heavily on the arm of Upper Black Eddy, notorious pimp and pusher. A brave despair, yellowing posters, breakfast in bed, doctor's orders.

LAKEWOOD CEMETERY

RUTH BERMAN

Elaine stood outside Lakewood Cemetery, on the hill between Lake Harriet and Lake Calhoun, staring in at the little nameless lake, where no pedestrians crowded the bank, no swimmers the shallow waters and no sailboats the deep. Across the street she could hear children screaming on swings and teeter-totters. She leaned against the iron mesh of the fence, feeling it hard and cold against her breasts.

In theory, if she went down the Calhoun side of the hill, along the lake boulevard, and up the slope to the pseudo-Grecian entrance, she could walk right in and – if her appetite for walking held out that long – back to the unnamed lake. But she didn't think he'd still be there if she did that, and, in any case, the attendants probably wouldn't let her in, dressed only in her swimsuit and towel.

He wasn't wearing anything, but she doubted that the attendants knew about him. His eyes were bluebells. The hair on his head and chest and legs and arms was ferns. They were short and curled tightly at the ends, giving to his head the appearance of an afro-cut on an untuned color tv. His penis was a long thin mushroom, possibly a shaggymane. She could see the dark gills of its undersurface just for a moment, as he sprang off a gravestone into the lake, in a flat racer's dive that had him a third of the way across the water before he surfaced.

It was not a large lake.

He reached the opposite bank in a few minutes, turned, and swam back again. He rolled out and perched himself on another gravestone to dry in the sun. Roots twined down the

stone from the soles of his feet, and he absently rubbed them off before they could sink in the soil.

She looked up at the three strands of barbed wire topping the fence. It had to be an effective barrier. The playground across the street drew kids to the area, and they would long since have found a way to get in and make civic nuisances of themselves, daring each other to brave the spooks, if it had been possible to get in that way. But still . . .

She looped her towel around her shoulders so that it would stay, then clambered up the wire mesh. It bent and swayed outwards with her weight, as if about to break and collapse on top of her, but she knew it was stronger than it felt. At the top she put her left hand on one of the bars supporting the barbed wire and brought her feet up so that she stood crouched over, with her toes between the top strands of the mesh, balancing herself on the one hand.

From behind she heard a half admiring, half horrified shout from a boy in the playground. 'Jeez, lookit her!'

She leaned harder on her left hand and vaulted over the wire. Her hand caught as she went over, and the palm was deeply scratched. The noise of the children cut off behind her. She landed, let herself drop in a heap, and rolled. She fetched up against a piece of speckled granite, lay still a moment, and stood up to inspect for damage.

Her feet were stinging from the impact, but not actually injured. Her hand hurt bitterly, but the cut did not look bad. She wrapped a corner of the towel around it and walked down the slope to the lake.

He sat up and looked at her, with drops of water still clinging to the flowers of his eyes, like dewdrops, or tears.

'Can I swim here?'

He waved his hand at the lake.

'Thank you.' She waded in. The water was warmer than either Calhoun or Harriet. The bottom was first muddy and then weedy, but she began swimming after a few steps. The water felt good on her feet and the torn hand. She practised a crawl straight across and sidestroked around the curve to come back to where she'd started.

It was good swimming. There were no rubber toys or divers to watch out for. He joined her as she came past, and together they swam the circle of the little lake.

They came out, and she spread her towel on the grass. She sat down on one half of it. He stood for a moment looking down at her, shifting his feet from side to side. Then he

sat down beside her, tucking his feet up off the ground, lotus fashion.

He picked up a corner of the towel and examined the fabric - the pattern of the weave, the length of the nap, the lines of the colored stripes. Then he smoothed it down and sat quietly considering the phenomenon. At last he smiled, showing small, round teeth, like white pebbles. He turned his head and looked at her, at the strands of wet hair lying close about her face like broken straws, the curves of her body, the curves of the edges of the blue bathing suit against her body, the tiny hairs catching the light on her arms. After a time he reached out his hand and cupped it over her hip, caressing the fabric of the suit.

She shivered, not quite sure if the touch was pleasant or not, and if it was meant to be so or not. She jumped to her feet and reached out her good hand to pull him up, too. Once he was up, she darted a few steps away, to see if he would race. They ran once around the lake. She was faster at first, but then ran out of wind. The race turned into a chase, and he herded her up against the fence, where he caught her. They leaned against the mesh, and kissed each other.

In that moment, a knowledge came to her, and it seemed as certain as a vision – or a tautology. If he lay still long enough to couple with her, he would take root around her, trapping them both beside the nameless lake. Submission to an end so peaceful seemed desirable, and she hugged his cool body closer, opening her lips against his.

The thorn which was his tongue pricked her mouth.

She cried out, and they both recoiled. He put his hand to his mouth convulsively as if the heat of her blood had burned him, and ran to the lake. He rinsed, spat, and drank. He picked up the towel, walked back to her, and wrapping the towel around her as if to protect his hands, he picked her up, cradled her in his arms, whirled once around to pick up speed, and flung her over the fence.

She landed on her feet, fell into a crouch, and lay still a while. Her skin and suit had finished drying, and the heat dropped on her again like weights. Sweat gathered on her, wherever skin touched skin. She could taste blood in her mouth, but she swallowed hard a few times, and it was gone.

She stood, and looked through the mesh. For a moment she thought she saw him, crouched on a gravestone, but it was only a willow growing behind it.

'Hey, you okay?'

Elaine turned and saw a boy from the playground coming near her. He pointed at the cut on her hand.

'Want a bandaid? My mom makes me carry them.' He dug into his jeans pocket and excavated a handful of red (or yellow) bandaids with cartoon figures printed on them in yellow (or red).

'No, th—' She stopped and thought it over. The bandaids were loud, but her hand had started hurting again. 'Yes. Thanks lots.'

'That's okay, I've got plenty. Hey!' he yelled across the street. 'It's my turn! Wait up, you guys.' He took off, sparing only time to wave goodbye and check for traffic.

Elaine pulled the tabs off the bandaids and put them on. The nearest waste-basket was down by the taffy-stand. She wadded the tabs up in her right hand, and, trailing her left hand bumpily against the wires, she made her way back down the hill to the crowded sands of the Harriet beach.

THE GHOSTS OF LUNA

IAN WATSON

In 1972 the Apollo flights ceased.

In 2022, on the fiftieth anniversary of the abandonment of the Moon, the Japanese unexpectedly sent a one-man expedition to the Sea of Tranquillity. It seemed a curiously anachronistic gesture at the time, and the world's media were frankly amused. But then, the Japanese have always had this thing about anniversaries. No doubt you remember how they re-bombed Pearl Harbor on December 7th 1991, with millions of bright red paper fans. How they descended on Oahu like a plague of butterflies!

So, off to Tranquillity went Taro Kawasaki, representing the Dai-Nippon Engineering Company – and what should he find but the first two Ghosts.

The world's media abruptly became respectful.

In the Sea of Tranquillity, bouncing around the descent stage of their LEM in lunar slow motion, like a couple of faded old action photos by Thomas Eakins of human bodies in motion, were two white forms silhouetted against blackest night, leaping and landing and flexing their legs before leaping again. Armstrong and Aldrin, no less. Or, at least, their ghosts.

Needless to say, they weren't nude like Eakins' sprightly youths. That would have been *lèse majesté*. They were properly suited up for EVA.

To begin with, Kawasaki suspected that a bad joke had been perpetrated on himself and his company by the United States, resentful at losing its traditional trade markets in Mexico and Canada to Japanese business. (This he later confided in his best-selling memoir, *Tsuki-no-kamikaze*,

'The Divine Wind on the Moon'). Could the whole phenomenon be a plant? A couple of clowns who had secretly landed just over the lunar horizon to prance around this solemn, anniversary-conscious oriental, as he ran up the Rising Sun flag?

Or maybe the Americans had achieved an electronics breakthrough of unparalleled dimensions in the projection of three-dimensional images to an exact spatial coordinate over a distance of a quarter of a million miles. And this was their callous, newsgrabbing way of unveiling the invention. But it didn't take Kawaski long to dismiss *that* notion, from what he remembered of American R & D.

And when the Armstrong Ghost bounded up to the Japanese and passed *right through him*, occasioning a sudden discomfort, best described as a chill in his lower abdomen, its ghosthood was abundantly apparent.

Thereafter Kawasaki had his work cut out not to mention pre-empting newstime on world TV networks beyond his wildest dreams. Urgent scrutiny of cameras Spectroscopes. Radar. X-ray machines. All the other gadgets Dai-Nippon had sent up to Tranquillity.

Radio queries provoked no response from the Ghosts. Film and TV registered their presence. X-rays ignored them. Radar condescended to be mildly disturbed, as though by a few wild goose echoes when geared up for the more solid blip of an airliner.

For the most part, the Ghosts bounced around in a fairly repetitive way, looking like a couple of rubbery refrigerators. Occasionally they disappeared. Reappeared. Kawasaki patiently recorded everything.

The big question back home on Earth, meanwhile: was there any ghostly Armstrong Consciousness, and Aldrin Consciousness, fastened inside those ghosts of spacesuits?

Historians recalled the odd behaviour of the original astronauts. Their nervous breakdowns. Religious conversions. Franchising of hot-dog restaurants. And the comments of Conrad and Bean. 'I never dreamed on the Moon,' Bean said of his sleep in a hammock slung in the LEM. 'I never dreamed either,' Conrad had dutifully echoed him. But every human being dreams, that's no psychological secret, you only have to watch the rapid eye movements. Had the astronauts' subconscious been siphoned out, by some mysterious process, to take on this ghost animation? Had

they left some essential fraction of their egos behind on the Moon?

The ecology groups prayed that the *Madness*, as they put it, wouldn't start up again. But alas for their protests, the imagination of America was rekindled. The second phase of the lunar adventure was soon on. The Vehicle Assembly Building down at the Cape was demothballed. Congress voted funds. The great rockets flew again, burning up their billion gallons of fuel. And Americans went back to the Moon, commencing 2023, to Tranquillity, Fra Mauro, Hadley-Apennines, Cayley-Descartes, Taurus-Littrow, to gape at these curious reflections of their past.

Imagination was rekindled, as imagination never had been fired since that first blurred footstep in the lunar soil, and that first insouciant, childishly clumsy tumble in the moon sands.

America had an authentic spiritual mystery on her hands. Let us leave Taro Kawasaki and move on a few years to the present, when all the sites have been revisited by Americans. Let us try to come to terms with the physical – and metaphysical – problems posed by the Ghosts of Luna.

One major trouble is, Kawasaki left no ghost of himself behind on the lunar surface for the second American Tranquillity expedition to find.

Was there something physically unique about conditions during the late Sixties and early Seventies of the last century?

Or does it take a certain period of time before the 'Ghost Image' can develop?

Or is it the case that only Americans could plant a ghost? That a Japanese, being Shintoist, not Christian, is denied the privilege of a separable soul?

(The latter type of speculation is obviously unscientific, not to say insulting, but some WASPS have seriously suggested it.)

The two most elegant physical explanations – coming near to scooping Nobel prizes for sheer chutzpah if nothing else – are Kampeier's 'macroparticle theory', and Ogilvie's 'solar camera' idea.

Rudolph Kampeier decided that the Ghosts were 'quasi-particles of discrete vacuum'. Particles are generally thought of as intensely small parcels of matter – protons, electrons, etc. But why couldn't there be a few giant particles as well, obeying the same laws of quantum mechanics? Particles that

could 'exist and not exist', simultaneously, as bundles of void?

Their origin? Well, during that earlier half-decade of lunar exploration in the Twentieth Century, the flux of neutrinos coming out of the Sun was particularly low – incompatible with nuclear processes supposed to be going on inside the Sun. Scientists working three thousand feet down in the Homestake Mine underneath Lead, South Dakota, detecting neutrinos in their tank of cleaning fluid, couldn't explain it. Unless (scary thought) the solar gases were about to stir themselves up, with a dramatic outpouring of radiations. Suppose, theorised Kampeier, during that slack period last century the neutrino flux had been 'topped up' by the emission of a few giant neutrino-like particles from the Sun – particles whose sheer size caused them to fall into an 'entropy sink' as soon as they hit the Moon. The Moon's geological configuration had been mapped to a depth of 1¼ kilometers by the orbiting command module of Apollo 17. Sheer structural topology might produce such effects as Kawasaki found, suggested Kampeier.

Why do we perceive these particles as the Ghosts of Astronauts? A conceptual illusion, smiled Kampeier (yes, you can smile, even in a mathematical equation). We have to see something – so we see what makes sense to our brains.

Ivar Ogilvie's 'solar camera' theory, on the other hand, posits a curious Sun Moon relationship, whereby the Sun functions as lens to the Moon's photographic plate. Again, topology plays a part in the argument. Only now it's the topology of the Sun – the patterns of sunspots, and the corresponding photon patterns arriving at the Moon's surface, where they corresponded fortuitously with the motions of our Moon Men, setting up a series of standing waves, still visible.

Could our astronauts ever have suspected, mused Ogilvie, that the Sun was watching them in the manner of a giant eyeball? That it was a Polyphemus? They were our brave Ulysses, after all.

But these theories don't explain the Ghosts fully to *my* satisfaction. Nor do the Astrological Horoscopes. Nor the ectoplasmic fantasies of the 'Forest Lawners'.

I'm not ashamed to say that I'm a poet. An astrophysicist of *feeling*. I chart galaxies of Beauty, Sentiment and Love.

I capitalize these words, as I do not wish to slip in con-

cepts such as Love and Beauty as if I took them for granted. That *would* be an arrogant assumption in today's world. I realize that, paradoxically, Love and Beauty are so much the rage, in a diluted, predigested, saccharine form, that the things themselves have lost all their old integrity, save for a few benighted, maverick poets such as myself, who feed on illusions – as in the Chinese legend the tapir is said to be an animal that feeds on dreams.

Topology of the lunar rocks, or of the Sun's gases, may be the scientist's province. But topology of dreams is the poet's province.

How did William Shakespeare phrase it? 'To give to airy nothings a local habitation and a place.' Organize the internal shape of dreams, so that they stand up on their own. And, correct, bounce about.

The Moon *Herself*: Selene, Ch'ang-o, Mama Qilla, Juno, Tsukiyomi – whatever name she travels by – she was the Dreamer; she was the Photographer.

For a billion years she courted the Earth with tide caresses. Could the tug of her gravity have been the cause of evolution in the first place? By stirring up the amniotic seas? Tossing the right sequence of amino acids together? So that she could in time conceive her own lover: a mind that could spin Poetry for her?

She had hung in her white castle waiting a billion years to be ridden out to chivalrously. Hopefully she had waited through Greek and Roman times, casting her beams down on the Earth, fluttering her eyelashes. When the court of Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine discovered Courtly Love, her heart skipped a beat. When the first Ranger probe plunged into her side, it was like a lance being splintered at a tournament in her honour.

Then, at long last, they came: the Twelve.

And what were they? Nothing but emotional buffoons! Not courtiers, but court jesters. Camelot had promised to send Knights – and sent a pack of commoners instead. They had no dreams. They turned everything they touched to lead.

The comparison of the Apollo Moon shots to sexual ejaculations was no misconception. The Moon is a beautiful, sexy lady. America ejaculated in the right direction, with those tall, slim rockets, from '69 through '72. But, humanity's representatives lacked the *style* to carry on a celestial love affair.

You can't say Luna didn't *try*. She waited a billion years. Then treasured her frigid lovers' every step, like the stone footprints outside Grauman's Chinese Theatre on Hollywood Boulevard – that other locus of frozen, solidified romance. She kept their images intact, a dozen dusty billet-doux.

Yet, the parting shot of her twelfth lover, as that last ascent stage blasted off like a child's spinning top into space! Can you imagine more callous words, to break off a love affair?

'*Aw, you've seen one moon, you've seen them all!*'

It was the last straw. It brought tears to her eyes. That twelfth spaceman's Ghost is faint and blurred, at Taurus-Littrow. And not surprising.

So she didn't bother with Taro Kawasaki. Or with anyone subsequently. The insulted mistress retreated into her memories, leaving Love as a dozen, absurd, bouncing ghosts of an illusion.

Do we really need to gawp at the images of our emotional inadequacy, as if they are some fine monument?

Couldn't we exercise a little tact and leave the wounds to heal?

She'll heal, in a few million years.

When we've faded.

'THE WOLF THAT FOLLOWS'

M. JOHN HARRISON

A little of the previous day's snow had settled on the field where *My Ella Speed* lay grounded. Between the blockhouses and the gloomy oubliettes of the freighter silos, patches of it betrayed the unwary foot – a skim of brown slush, gelling steadily as the thermometer dropped. The field was almost deserted; the lights were doused; the earlier cirrus had blown away east and left behind it a fast-moving two thousand metre cloudbase that dyed the night as black as Himation's hat.

Truck, prone in the muck fifteen yards from his boat, awaited a signal. He was soaked from head to foot, clenching his jaw to keep it from tearing itself off and his teeth from betraying his position to the pair of General Gaw's policemen on sentry-go at the base of the unlit ship. There was no sign of Fix the bosun, which worried him no less than the fact that the General hadn't even bothered to keep up the fiction of a Port Authority arrest.

The policemen beat their arms and stamped their feet, cocked their heads as a distant siren fluted momentarily down empty arcades, morose and fading. 2 a.m. dock stinks breathed over the field. It was the uncertain hour, when all kinds of rat dance beneath the sidewalks and the air is as bitter as lead in the lungs.

Truck sneaked a look to the left of him where Himation lay in similar discomfort. The pale hand rose and fell, the cloak whirled like the wing of a cormorant.

Truck heaved himself to his feet and skulked toward his man. He'd gained three quarters of the distance – and the Fleet still quite oblivious – when Himation overtaxed his sense of balance on the tricky surface, flailed his arms, and

went down like an empty black gunny sack. Immediately, Truck's intended victim raised a shout and sent a Chambers bolt fizzing into the slush alongside the anarchist's head. Himation wailed and began crabbing rapidly about on his hands and knees. Shadows pranced dangerously on the blistered hull of the *Ella Speed*.

'Whistle's gone, Tiny!' yelled Truck. He leaped into the air and landed on the astonished copper's back, locking his legs round the waist, left hand cupping the occipital bulge and pushing forward while the right forearm came across the windpipe and hauled back. The subject of the assault attempted to shoot one of Truck's feet off. Truck bent his head and bit an ear. The gun fell without going off.

Meanwhile, Tiny Skeffern had nipped in from the other side of the ship in a hasty ambush and kicked the legs from under the second policeman. He leapt around him, putting the boot in and jumping away again, yelping enthusiastically. He hadn't bargained, however, on the Fleet arsenal . . .

Truck gave a final wrench, dropped off his host like a dead tick and punched him in the kidneys twice. Suffering cruelly, the Fleet man staggered round to face his tormenter: took the hard vee between Truck's stiffened, separated thumb and forefinger directly in his larynx. His eyes rolled up. Truck hung over him, panting.

'Jesus!' bawled Tiny, looking down the muzzle of a Chambers gun.

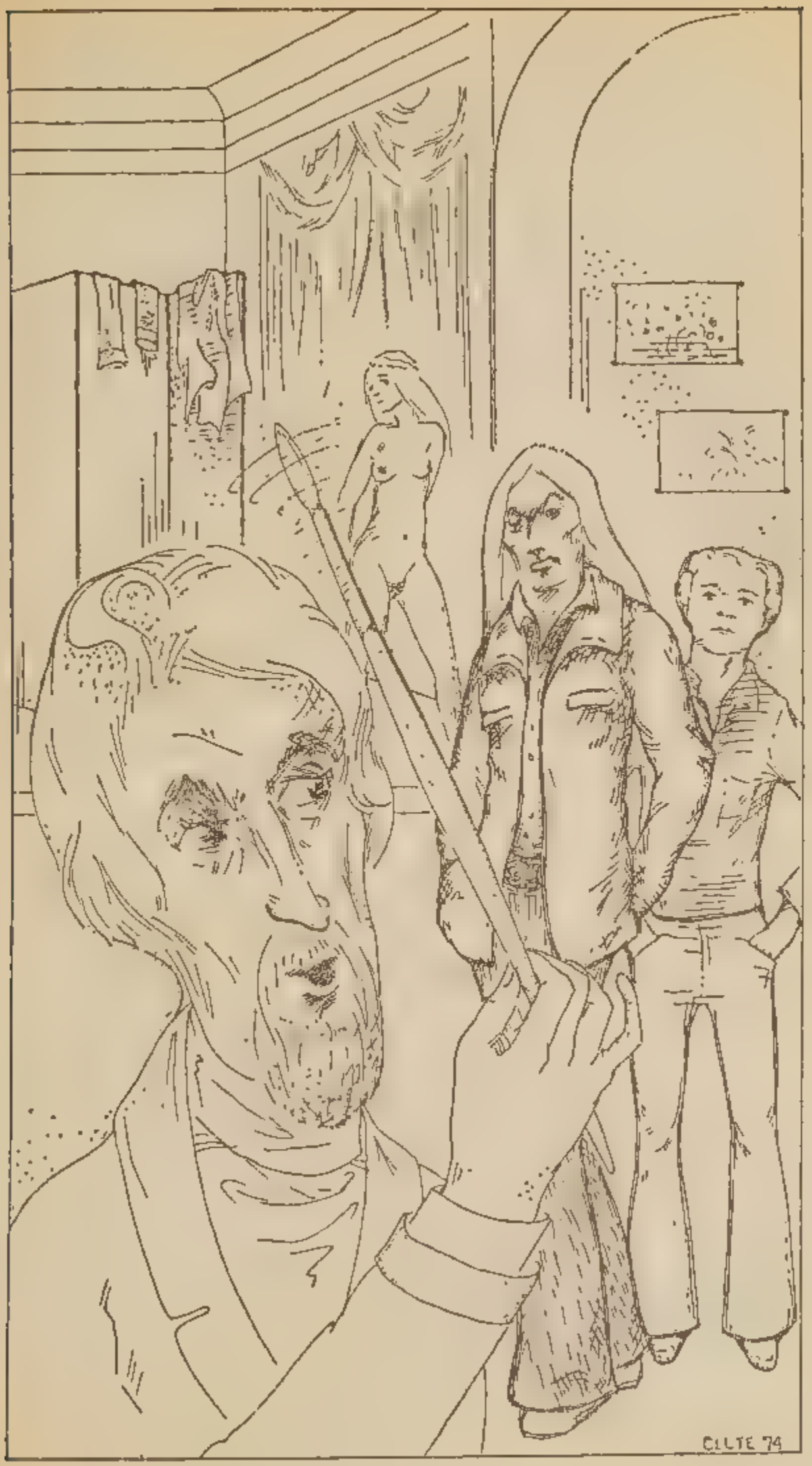
Alice Gaw's law was on its feet, Tiny was rigid. Truck took a pace toward them, winced.

The first and only shell fired in the encounter was still boring its way mindlessly into the mud of the field; its fading glare lit a quick, fishlike flicker of movement; and with a long knife sticking in his neck, the remaining policeman choked at Tiny, dropped his weapon. 'Ooh,' he said, kneeling down. He subsided slowly and was still.

Himation picked himself up carefully. 'That was "a dirty chance well taken",' he said, brushing down his cloak and inspecting his gritty palms.

Truck swallowed, looked at him aggressively. 'If you can do that sort of stuff why the hell did we have to go through this charade at all?' he demanded. 'You could have picked them both off from a mile away with that thing.' He ran his tongue over his swelling lower lip. He knew he was going to think about what he'd just done and then be ill.

Himation retrieved his knife. He licked it deliberately, his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blue eyes glittering at Truck over eight inches of stainless steel 'There's an art to murder,' he explained. 'And a spontaneity to Art, though Pater wouldn't agree.' They confronted silently for a moment (Tiny was trying not to notice them, hands thrust into his pockets, studying some rivet-heads on *Ella Speed*'s hull): then, acknowledging Truck's sneer with a curt nod, he went over to the man who had tried to shoot him. He was limping slightly. 'This one's just as dead, Captain. You'd better find it in your heart to approve.'

'I don't understand what you're talking about,' said Truck, but he did.

A light blazed out from the boat. The loading ramp descended, humming, to reveal the misshapen silhouette of Fix the bosun, stout legs set firmly apart, humping his ugly chopper. 'You move into the light,' he said, snapping his sawmill mouth. 'Where I can see you. She's my boat since you took the Captain.'

But they managed to pacify him and urged him to put the thing away, which he did with care, wrapping it in some filthy rags he had carried with him for the purpose since the day he fled the squirearchy in Crome. Ten minutes later, the cubical geometry of Carter's Snort flared briefly green as the *Ella Speed* fired up and shook Earth from under her.

'I left my bloody guitar!' cried Tiny Skeffern, beating his forehead with the heel of his hand.

Himation the anarchist glanced anxiously at the exterior screens. 'I hope you're skilled at evasion, Captain.'

'We'll have to go back. We'll have to go back and fetch it!'

'Look, I'm sorry about all that on the field,' apologised Truck, scratching the back of his neck.

They weren't followed (the General's imagination was focussed elsewhere, and a violent old junkie occupied her only eye); but they violated the operational envelope of a solitary missile interceptor on the way up, and it broke its long parabola through the upper reaches of the air to look them over.

Precarious and hungry, hovering on the edge of the time when its prey might come into season, like a huge fragile insect against the gloomy bulk of the Earth, it spun and darted – extruding its armament and making playful threatening passes – then looped away on a complicated rising

curve, trailing anhedral detector vanes, satisfied that *Ella Speed* was creeping out of its sphere of concern.

They watched it with wistful admiration. A precise, composed hesitation roll through fifty miles of airspace, then it climbed away like a roman candle; to vanish – flip! – as if amazed by its own dexterity. 'Arrogant sod,' said Truck A thin-skinned predator in a rarefied region, it could have vapourised a city. 'Will you just look at that, Tiny!'

'You mean there's a bloke in there?'

Himation shook his head. 'A boy,' he murmured absently. 'Only a boy has the reflexes. I flew one of those things until I was thirteen. They give you amphetamines for your reactions: you get addicted fairly quickly. Nothing's the same when you come down.' He gazed out at the failing atmosphere with a kind of angry yearning on his face 'A lot of them are lost from dexedrine euphoria – they try to take them where the air is thicker, they try to land them but the hulls burn out.'

He took the controls soon after that. The ship shuddered fit to break its back and began its tortuous clawing progress through the dyne-fields to his secret destination. It was a wholly ungraceful journey, but short, haunted by the beautiful burning boys of the anarchist's youth.

He was still morose and withdrawn when *My Ella Speed*'s Dynaflow drivers cut out with a thump and she spat herself back into reality like a grub from a mouthful of fruit. Her frame groaned and flexed; her exterior screens, confused by tachyon interference, hallucinated bizarre fish, sea horses plated with brass, unheard music from a questionable dimension. 'We're out!' said Truck with relief; another time, she wasn't going to make it.

'Hey !' as the screens cleared.

Hung out in the interminable void before them was a spherical asteroid perhaps two miles in diameter at its equator. A pretty, self-willed rock, speedwell blue and flecked with gold, it was orbiting no detectable primary body. The rest of the Galaxy seemed oddly remote, as if this fragment of jetsam had attained some absolute topological direction and was describing an intricate, metaphysical course from which everything else in the universe was equally distant. Hung out there alone, then, like a semi-precious moon; implausible.

'We are between the stars here, weaving along the gravity interface of Sol and Centauri,' said Himation. 'Pater found this place. He first named it "Howell", because it's a rogue—' He laughed at their bewilderment, and refused to explain the joke. 'Lately though he's begun to call it "Versailles".'

He pointed at the forward screen, black shrouded arm, white finger 'Look! Watch the golden areas—'

Two bright flecks drifted out of the blue eye, expanded dizzily, and quite suddenly became two ships – two racing golden cruisers fully a quarter of a mile long, with lean flanks, raked and curved fins and curious dorsal bulges. White, gem-like flames burnt at their sterns; turquoise enamel-work made flowing ideographs over their hulls, a language of delicious, tangled flower stems. They were like nothing Truck had ever seen. They bracketed *Ella Speed*; he shivered at the enticing curvature of their bellies; they were spires from a forgotten planet, they were awesome and perplexing.

'*Fastidious* and *La Vie de Boheme*,' announced Himation proudly. 'Two among forty nine. But never as dangerous as my own; she's the *Atlanta in Calydon*,

"The wolf that follows, the fawn that flies".

She's over the horizon from here. But they'll do to shepherd us down.'

Good humour spilled over into his hands again. They discovered a tiny live lizard behind Fix the bosun's ear. It sat in the cup of his palms distending its scarlet throat, and blinked studiously up at him.

'I wouldn't have believed it,' declared Fix, 'if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes.'

Later, after Himation had nudged *My Ella Speed* into a pit in the cyanic rock and grounded her gently, he refused to leave the ship. 'I got work to do, boss,' he insisted. 'She's coming out of the Dyne like a pregnant duck. I can't have that, not if we're going back to hauling cargo when all this –' He nodded pointedly at the anarchist '—is done with. I *suppose* they'll have toolshops for those fairy great ships out there.' He stood stubbornly by the command panels, daring with folded arms Himation, General Gaw, UASR, politics and prisons. 'We got to have maintenance.'

'Never argue with your bosun, Captain,' advised Himation, and with flourishes made Fix a present of the lizard.

'I'm sure I don't know what to do with it,' grumbled the Chromian, but you could see he was pleased.

The asteroid was hollow.

Himation led Truck and Tiny through an outer shell, a *primum mobile*, of workshops, where pandemonium reigned among powerful lifting rigs and ship components to which Truck could put no name; where masked relatives of the wreckers at Carter's Snort waved their plasma torches like hayforks and seemed to take altogether as much pleasure in putting things together as their cousins did in taking them apart. After this demoniac leaping and cutting and commotion of shadows, they passed through a sphere of armouries – deserted and still, racked with dyne-torpedoes and the barrels of reaction cannon like organ pipes in the chill of an ancient church. 'Pater comes here often. Aren't they fine?' And finally a living area, where the air was heavy with an enigma of luxury: passages tapestried with hunting scenes by long dead artists from Oudry and Desportes, full of strangely-clothed anarchists who nodded to Himation or halted their errands to attend to cheval glasses of crystal and adjust an item of dress.

They glimpsed through half-open doors a room whose tall, latticed windows seemed to look out over a pale lake among oaks where the great wet leaves of hemlock hung melancholic and inviting; another with a huge marble mantle on which ticked a clock shaped like a gilded elephant; a third empty but for one *fauteuil* – a woman wearing a white dress oddly spotted with crimson reclined there, slowly passing the rings on the fingers of her left hand to those of her right as she listened with immobile expression to the voice of a man they could not see. Himation smiled. 'A hologram,' he said. 'The Hotel Pimodan, 1849. Maryx, who inspired the *Mignon* of Ary Scheffer. She is listening to Baudelaire. They are waiting for Gauthier and the snake-woman and the rest of the salon.' He entered the room and passed his hand through the langorous, mask-like face. 'See? Isn't it beautiful?'

'Are you a history professor or something?' asked Tiny politely. Truck sniggered, impressed against his will.

But Himation only shrugged laconically, and, further on, rapped lightly twice at an elegant double door. The room he ushered them into was a spacious airy studio, lit as if by a

northlight as precious and passing as the Art it imitated. On a dais at the end of the chamber were easel and canvas; at the other sat a little sallow-faced girl with grave eyes and tiny breasts. Her clothes hung over a lacquered screen, and beside her was a basket of crochet work and a volume of poems, and, as she worked, she thoughtfully sang a song about artists and the way they loved:

Ils aiment si artistement
Ils sont de artistes gens.

Her eyes rested briefly on the intruders, calm, uninvolved. Around her on the eggshell-tinted walls hung Hokusai prints of uncanny refinement, arranged with harmonious aloofness; ethereal porcelain ginger jars adorned with the flowers of prunus and hawthorn rested on their shelves in rapturously exact alignment; there were silken fans decorated with dim balletic shapes. It was a fabrication of Art in itself, exquisite, ephemeral.

But it was not the room, despite its dreamy invitation; nor was it the girl. It was the man before the easel, with his tube of white lead and hog-hair bristle.

He was small and dapper, with tidy brown hands. He wore a white linen suit, a green carnation in the buttonhole of the left lapel. His eyes were dark and sharp; yet bubbling, as if a constant rediscovery of their use were being made behind them. His hair was black and curly, with a strange white streak. His palette was a nocturne of greys and midnight blue. He addressed the canvas with deft, quick motions, but somehow contrived to suggest by them an air of eloquent idleness. He was thief and a rebel, he was a man of discrimination, he was ageless. He was Swinburne Sinclair-Pater, aesthete extraordinary and Interstellar Anarchist, and he prowled the Galaxy like a brilliant tiger; stalked the self-respect of IWG and UASR; and – snap! Bright teeth.

'Ah, le petit Manteau, au chapeau bizarre!' he cried, waving at Himation. 'Come in, dear boy! (Heloise, we are finished for today. Come tomorrow at the same time.) Captain Truck—' He dropped his brush and sprang down from the dais, extending his hand, '—how wistful of you to come in fancy dress!'

Truck looked down at himself resentfully. 'Do you like my studio? The porcelain is K'ang, wonderful in its brittleness, hm? (Come Heloise: out! Out!)': And he gestured

extravagantly toward the door. The girl thinned her lips at him, shrugged, indolently put down her crochet hook and took up her clothes.

He forgot her and harried Himation instead. 'An unimaginative time with the Queen of Cups, eh, Manteau? Still living in the Paltry Century? But you gave him my message. Look, we'll go into my living room shall we?'

By contrast, the suite of rooms adjoining the studio was frugal and austere, with little chintz curtains, stained floorboards bordering Turkey carpets and an atmosphere of cherished isolation. In the sitting room, which was achieved by way of a low passage and a Gothic doorway, there were a few short shelves of old books, a scrubbed deal table and some stiff but charming high-backed chairs. For ornament, a bowl of dried rose petals stood in the precise centre of the table. On the walls of this prim apartment were hung two pictures: one a head of some wine-god, unfathomable and sensually cruel; the other a rough sketch of a morose, stooping young man – thin, heavy jawed, with deep, close-set eyes, dressed in the garments of a defunct High Church order.

Here, they sat down. Himation disappeared into the depths of the suite, returning shortly to flourish his cloak over the table-top (rose petals stirred like leaves of another year, and a remote scent filled the room) and manifest a bottle of wine. He held up his hand - prolonged the moment – four glasses appeared, their stems between his fingers. A faint musical tone. Pater smiled on indulgently.

John Truck, like most spacers, was strictly contemporary. He preferred the latest things. He had no particular use for history, little knowledge of it except where it coincided with fashion, and no desire whatever to live in it. He regarded Pater's rose bowl with suspicion, feeling that he might be the butt of some rare intellectual joke, and Pater himself with a faint hostility. He couldn't understand the dualism of character suggested by the rich studio on one hand and this monkish living room on the other; he couldn't discover a reason for any of it.

So when Pater, eyeing Himation's hands with severe appreciation as they passed the glasses round the table, said, 'I admired your effort on Morpheus, Captain,' he didn't quite know how to respond. After a moment:

'I only did it for the money,' he said curtly. He sensed an opening gambit, and was determined not to be enlisted. 'It

was a long time ago, and on another world; I don't remember much about it; it was the last time I ever pushed dope. I didn't even realise your lot were organising a revolution until quite late on. I probably wouldn't have done it if I had.'

This last wasn't wholly true. He had enjoyed the last days on Morpheus when it became plain through the smoke and the smarting eyes that the putsch had succeeded. Living among the ruins had made no demand on him; and, like Himation, the anarchists who had used his peddling operation as a cover had been self-contained, amiable, demanding little. But he had been used, nonetheless. He scowled at himself, opened his mouth: but before he could make it plain that he wouldn't be used again, Himation had interrupted.

'Come on, Pater,' he reproved. 'Your studio's a proverb in porcelain; Chalice Veronica is quite without taste among plastic furniture; and Captain Truck's a hero on Morpheus –' His eyes glittered ironically at Truck from underneath his hat-brim ' whether he likes it or not. But he's also come all the way from Earth on your invitation: at least tell him why you asked him here.' He winked broadly. Truck looked away.

'In these days of rapid and convenient travel,' said Pater thoughtfully, 'to come from Earth does not necessarily denote any great strength of character. Honesty does, however, despite its determination to undress all over my living room – do you imagine that I care in the least what the artist's motives are, Captain?' He showed his white teeth at Himation across the table. 'As for *why*, you philistine, you conjuror: out of courtesy. What else? Since we're going to steal the Captain's birthright from General Gaw the Bearded Lady, I feel we ought at least to tell him first.'

Tiny Skeffern understood even less of his surroundings than Truck, and found even less to say. He groaned and drank his thin astringent wine. He was wondering where he could steal a decent guitar. 'Take it easy, Truck,' he said.

John Truck got to his feet and gripped the edge of the table. He stared at the head of Bacchus on the wall, then at Himation the anarchist. 'You brought me here,' he said bitterly. 'You can take me back to my ship.' His gaze passed on to Pater (but could only see filmy images of Alice Gaw's eyepatch and the eager grey face of the hermaphrodite pusher king). 'I'm sick of saying it,' he whispered. 'You can

stuff your bloody Centauri Device. You can *stuff* it!' He walked back along the narrow corridor and stood in Pater's studio, resting his forehead on a cool wall. He heard Tiny hurrying after him, determinedly gave his attention to a print that seemed to depict an old man standing under a tree by a chasm. Tiny went away.

After a while, though, Pater came in.

He mounted the dais and considered the easel. He took up a fine bristling hog-hair and dabbed it at his canvas. The result of this he considered lengthily. 'Captain, I don't want the Device,' he said, his voice echoing slightly in the tall room. 'All I want to do, dear boy, is take it from General Gaw. You understand? If she wants it, if UASR want it, badly enough for them to fight openly in the street for the man who can make it work – if they are prepared to do that, than I don't care for either of them to have it. You see?' He sighed. 'You don't.'

Truck ignored him, but he had abandoned the print despite himself and was staring at the busy shoulders of the white linen suit. Painting unconcernedly, Pater went on:

'I certainly don't want *you*. I may have gathered my following from "rag pickers, knife grinders and tinkers", but at least they're decently dressed: you, on the other hand, look like one of Veronica's tramps. You have no aesthetics and less education. You fail even in your responsibility for this thing dug up on a dead planet by a lunatic. Ah! So far, you have saved the Galaxy immense pain solely by your own selfishness! If Gaw gets her hands on it, and if it's what she thinks it is, some vast new atrocity will eclipse Centauri itself: yet you've made no attempt to ensure it won't happen – all you've done so far is to run away from people you don't much like.'

He swung round from his palette, an awful contempt distorting his face (for an instant, Truck glimpsed the brilliant carnivore beneath the skin and understood that, against all odds, it was a moral animal); caught Truck staring at him: laughed.

'What could you and I *possibly* have in common?'

He frowned.

'I sense in you something I'll never possess. A strength, a vast and implacable iconoclasm. We live in a sick charade of political polarities; of death, bad art, and wasted time – all in the cause of ideologies that were a century out of date in their heyday. I sense that you of all people have it in you

to end that, and make me as obsolete as Earth (for I'll be redundant if IWG and UASR give up their corpse's grip). Ridiculous, isn't it?'

He left the easel.

'So: a deal then, Captain, after all! If I take the thing from the Bitch of All the Galaxy and give it to you instead, will you accept your responsibility for its final disposition? Take it, dear boy. You *are* the last Centauran: and I'll only lose it somewhere if you don't.'

And he held out his hand.

They returned to the sitting room, where Pater poured more wine. Himation left them soon after that. He glittered at Truck from under his hat and said: 'We'll be moving out soon, so I'd better go and arm the *Atalanta*. But we'll meet again, Captain, I hope. If not, good luck. Bore him, Pater, and I'll make you vanish in filthy smoke.' He swept out, cloak billowing; and as his long legs carried away down the corridor they heard him intone,

'"Come with bows bent and with emptying of quivers,
Maiden most perfect, lady of light . . ."'

'He's good at that conjuring stuff,' said Tiny Skeffern, belching reminiscently. 'I'll give him that.'

The Interstellar Anarchist smiled. 'He's my son,' he told Tiny quietly, 'but despite that the best cruiser captain I've ever had.'

'Christ,' said Truck, rolling some wine round his mouth. 'This ethanol's some rough old stuff.'

Pater winced.

'She's transferring the Device to Earth, Captain – a decision taken against the advice of her staff nearly three days ago, when she thought she had you safe in Albion Megaport. She is most anxious to effect an introduction between the two of you.'

It was some hours after the conversation in the studio. Truck had bathed, eaten, even slept a bit, and was now nearing the end of Pater's guided tour of Howell (which he did in fact insist on calling 'Versailles').

'But it seems the Device will not abide the dyne-fields for more than a second or two at a time, so a journey that should have taken hours is still in progress. They send the trans-

porter into Dynaflow drive and – pop! – out it comes again, for no reason that can be discovered. They have gained a few light days. In it goes again – and so it goes on. A comic process with a real attraction for us.'

Pater stood, ridiculously neat and dapper, beneath the great ventral curve of a ship named *Driftwood of Decadence*, which had squeezed itself into one of the massive repair silos of the asteroid like a wasp in an apple. To his white suit and green carnation he had added a fantastic low-crowned hat of cream straw. Here at the rim of Howell, away from the generators at the core, the artificial gravity was a little feeble: Pater bounced in it as if perpetually embarking on an *entrechat*, thumbs stuck into his waistcoat pockets.

'To keep pace with its charge, the Fleet escort must spend a lot of time out of Dyne. If we catch the convoy there, they can be embarrassed – we are lightly armed, but these vessels are quicker in ordinary space, and more manoeuverable, than anything IWG or UASR has ever been able to field against us.'

Truck squinted the bright length of the *Driftwood of Decadence*. Turquoise arabesques glimmered mysteriously down her side; the smell of hot metal drifted about her like the musk of a sleeping, barbaric priestess; the light of plasma torches exploded soundlessly off her hull to fill the silo with a ceremonial aurora. Pater – whom he had grown to like despite his incomprehensible humours and affectations – regarded him with a quizzical smile. He scratched his head. He was on the stony verge of some revelation.

'Who designed them for you?' he murmured. 'Who built them?' He reached out to touch one of the great anhedral tail-surfaces; she was warm and vibrant. Suddenly, he was at the very edge of it all *'Where did they come from, Pater?'* – And, tumbling down the steep scarp of understanding – 'Where?' This almost a sigh, because for spacers there is one ritual enigma, and he was within sight of something unbelievable.

Pater laughed and took his arm. 'You could say I found them,' he suggested, 'or again: that they were given to me.' He examined these ideas for a time; neither seemd to satisfy him. 'Shall we walk back? I'll tell you something of it as we go.' But he said nothing more until they had reached the sphere of armouries, the sphere of stillness. There, head tilted as if to catch the ghost of ecclesiastical music, he gazed

at a bank of long black torpedoes and began abruptly, 'Imagine it, Captain!—

'My ship was experimental. Some discontinuity, some lapse of topology – a woman nervously twisting a lilac-stalk – had torn her out of the dyne fields. She was spiralling along the vacant rim of the Galaxy, her Dynaflow drivers gone. Imagine the horror with which I stared at the place they had occupied, watching a few thin-film control circuits drift about the engine room. Nothing more remained, just those few flakes of technology – as if *lunaria annua* had shed its seeds in free fall!

'I rushed to the exterior screens, despairing. But there—! A clinker, a cinder, the merest of dim, dead suns! It took me two years to reach that place, Captain. I knew it was useless to me. I saw ahead only the cemetery orbit: but what else was I to do?

'I became irresolute, drifting for a month round that slagheap sun, the ship like a wounded arum lily. Can you see me? Then: a point-source on the screens: a collision alarm! And there they were, seven times seven of them, slipping past like a train of comets approaching aphelion. I signalled them on all frequencies – they ignored me; I expended the last of my sud-Dyne fuel to overhaul them – they were undeviating; I boarded them – they were deserted.

'I boarded all of them – how bright their interiors were, how complicated and alien! – and all were empty but one; on the last, I discovered him.

'He came from nowhere you or I will ever see, Captain. He was heraldic. His exoskeleton glowed dark green like oiled metal, his wings were shot with bizarre gold veins, and his eye-clusters caught the light like globes of rough obsidian. Complex chrome-yellow symbols covered his carapace!

'He was dying, he had been dying out there for fifty years, adrift alone with his magnificent fleet. Ochre fluids leaked from his joints, strange burns cross-hatched his thorax.

'Imagine us! For months we strive to communicate. His weak forelimbs scrabble against the floor, creating pointless, agonised patterns! – But he understood me long before I him. He came from outside, Captain; his ships had crossed the cruel gap between the Galaxies. He could not tell me where. He spoke of his race's millenia-long search for the metaphysical nature of space; of a disease or madness that had led his crews at last to blow their hatches and beat their

wings deliriously against the vacuum, like the hawk moth against the attic lamp!

'I sent him to join them out there the day he died. In his ultimate throes he stung himself repeatedly, his long abdomen thrashing. He was desperate to explain the InterGalactic drive - he was desperate that someone should continue the search. But I could not grasp its principles, save perhaps to dimly comprehend this: the continuum has emotions – and the golden ships are the culmination of an Art addressed to Space itself!'

For some time, Pater brooded quietly over his dyne-torpedoes as if exhausted by his queer eloquence, even his gestures limp as they continued to sketch or imitate the feeble scratching limbs of the dead alien commander. When Truck prompted, 'But you learned to fly the ships in Dyne?' he snapped his fingers impatiently and muttered, 'Yes, of course. What does that matter? It was easy: their drivers are quite similar to our own; but what use are such engines when—?' He contemplated that wasted opportunity.

'None,' agreed Truck, and walked on through the corridors of Howell – speechless, as spacers are when they consider that pillar of enigma at the closed gates of the Galaxy; the unattainable, the post-Galactic drive.

But five minutes later, Howell was shuddering to the clangour of alarm.

In the 'Hotel Pimodan, 1849', the laser holograms of Maryx and Baudelaire faded like spectres, caught between a whisper and a significant smile, as the asteroid drew power for the launch of Pater's raiders.

Out in the repair-shops, grimy stunted engineers paused to scratch their horrid armpits and speculate about the target;

The crew of the *Driftwood of Decadence* stared at their ship and spat, gloomily reflecting that Pater would never allow her to lift in that condition;

And, pausing outside the doors of his apartments, the Interstellar Anarchist peeled his lips back off his feral teeth and winked at John Truck, his depression evaporating as the klaxons wailed. 'Now! We have them located! Fetch your friends, if they want to join the dirty-work: but quickly! Meet me on *The Green Carnation* within the half-hour!'

It was easier said than done. Howell boiled with anar-

chists: mad dandified gunners wearing mutton-chop whiskers and outrageous sideburns; navigators favouring the leather flying helmets and Sidcot-suits of a forgotten war; barrel-chested mechanics in striped jerseys and tight knee-breeches – and all of them making book on their chances of survival or spoils as they scrambled, shedding tarot-cards, poems, and poker dice, for their ships.

Himation, glimpsed on a crowded corridor: his crew bobbed behind him like gulls in the wake of a black-sailed lugger. Pale hands flickered and danced, but the madness was infectious. All he said was, 'After the strike, Captain!' and he was gone.

Truck found Tiny in a small square room where faded charcoal sketches covered the brown and crumbling plaster. Over his knee was an old acoustic guitar with a warped rosewood fretboard; on the brass bed that filled the place sat Heloise the model, her tight sallow body glowing in the deteriorating northlight. She regarded Tiny sulkily and sang '"Ils sont de artistes gens",' in her pretty, muted voice. 'Can't you tell him to play less accompaniment?' she appealed to Truck. 'It's the song that counts.' And she got up to stare out of the artificial window at the *ateliers* of a Paris long blown to hell by the Rat Bomb wars, her little bottom quivering petulantly.

'You don't need any electricity for this,' explained Tiny. 'Isn't that something?'

Truck dragged him through the bedlam of militant Howell. Their half-hour was almost up, the asteroid was trembling to the pulse of warming engines, expectant. 'What about Fix?' cried Tiny, hugging his new acquisition.

'No time. He'd only want to bring that sodding chopper.'

They stumbled aboard *The Green Carnation*.

The klaxons died.

In the ensuing silence Swinburne Sinclair-Pater smiled and adjusted the set of his coat, the tilt of his elegant hat. He raised his hand. 'Go!' he commanded. With a raffish cheer the engineers fed power, the navigators touched their good-luck charms; and forty-seven golden raiders took to the aether like a pack of lush Byzantine hounds, racing and quivering and vying for the scent. But however they tried, none could outdo *The Green Carnation*, and she ran out ahead of them, an incitement, a triumph, and a hard gem-like flame.

Aboard the flagship, Truck and Tiny, immobile, awed:

A blue-grey waxy light drowned her pentacular command-bridge, running like tepid fire down the slippery perspectives of an extraGalactic geometry, forming optical *verglas* on planes of alien metalwork, tracing the formal interlacing designs that covered the inner hull. Every four or five seconds, banks of stroboscopic lamps fired off, freezing and quantifying jagged areas of shadow, but defining no shape the eye could appreciate. Nothing was perpendicular or dependable.

Now white and dazzling, now hard black silhouettes, Pater's quarterdeck crew moved at ease through this dis-jointed medium, tending the bizarre original equipment of the ship or settling like insects among more identifiable machinery bolted roughly to the deck. They trailed loops of cable from portable computing facilities, calling off queries and co-ordinates in a rising chant. A subsonic ground bass reverberated through the body cavities; other voices chat-tered and decayed in the foreground like the cries of autistic children heard in a dream.

Above them, ribbons of circuitry framed a layout of enormous screens, on which were visible the rest of the fleet:

They hung in gay ambush, *Maupin*, *Trilby* and *Les Fleurs du Mal*; the *Whistler*, the *Fastidious* and the *Strange Great Sins*. In two long wings of twenty-four, they poised them-selves 'at the sharp apex of the present moment between two hypothetical eternities' – *Madame Bovary* and the *Ima-ginary Portraits*; *Syringa* and *White Jonquil*. Centauri was nearer here, a bare actinic jewel off the port bow of *Atalanta in Calydon*, from which Himation the conjuror led the second wing. Space enfolded them as they waited for their prey, they were embedded: a bracelet of gold in black vol-canic glass - the *Forsaken Garden*, the *Let Us Go Hence*, and *The Melancholia That Transcends All Wit*.

'Here we begin to guess at the nature of space,' said Pater softly to Truck. 'Our palette is prepared. The Galaxy has given us our canvas, a dead dragonfly has bequeathed us the brushes we have to hand. We make Space. We define it. Look out there. IWG and UASR see at best a conduit for Earth's rubbish of politics. *We* infer reality. None of this belongs to Earth or to ideology. It is inviolate.'

To prove his point, perhaps, space ignored him.

Truck, meanwhile, had been visited by peculiar, stealthy emotional stirrings. Oddly enough, he perceived something

of what Pater was suggesting, and saw himself suddenly as a denizen of this metamathematical or aesthetical space. Like poor Annie Truck, a losing vector – her life a moveable analogy for hard vacuum, her Ad Ae habit a dyne field of the head, himself a last-minute fibril of hypothesis extending toward some once-glimpsed mental Galactic edge. He became uncomfortable.

'I don't know anything about that,' he said, squinting along the optical maze of the command-bridge, 'but this isn't any kind of flying I'm used to. It looks more like a one-night stand at The Spacer's Rave.'

What else could he say? – he was a lout.

'What do we do now?'

'We wait,' said Pater (who wasn't misled, and appeared to be looking at him with a sort of compassionate irony): 'But not for long.'

In that, he was correct. A willowy young fellow wearing his blond beard tied up with tarred string leapt to his feet and waved a fist over his head. His arcane apparatus had discerned something leaving the dyne-fields not a hundred thousand miles from their ambuscade. A few minutes later, it popped up on one of the forward screens, heading at a fair pace straight down the open anarchist throat: six IWG battleships like black and orange melons englobing an orbit-to-orbit medium haulage vehicle made of spidery girders, small ball bearings and a big silver caterpillar – this last the hold section, with a capacity of several million tons.

Activity on *The Green Carnation* redoubled: the lights became fierce, bursts of ultrasound attacked the command-bridge like bats; the quarterdeck crew donned one-way visors and multiplied their efforts, jerking spastically from machine to machine in the stroboscopic glare, calling 'It's green – It's brown – I have you on four –'

Himation came through scratchily on a battle-communication frequency, tidal RF interference grinding behind his voice. 'We can knock the drive pods right off it, Pater,' he suggested.

'Quick then, Manteau: before they can get it back into the Dyne. *On les aura!*'

The Green Carnation and *Atalanta in Calydon* detached themselves from the opposed files of the ambush: they raced toward one another, met head-on in a suicidal flare of retrofire, executed a terrifying siamese turn through ninety degrees of arc, and hurled themselves side by side at the

transporter, white heat blazing at their sterns and a trail of stripped and violated particles streaming out behind them.

IWG woke up; staggered about; broke formation – 'They've sent us beginners!' cried Himation joyously. And as *The Green Carnation* ran on in through the broken globement, her rearward screens showed the rest of the fleet closing like a golden jaw. Dyne-torpedoes flipped end over end out of their tubes and began a misleading vibration - in and out of Reality they went, like shoals of pike seen through muddy water, and slipped among the battleships.

Pater himself took control of the flagship. He bore down on the haulage vessel like a madman, the command-bridge glare turning his buttonhole carnation black and his teeth the colour of steel. 'Torpedoes are so unselective, Captain!' he shouted in Truck's ear: 'And I love those long reaction guns!' The caterpillar expanded until it filled the screens, huge registration numbers against its silver skin. And bigger yet: until Truck was digging his fingernails into his wet palms; until *The Green Carnation* howled with proximity alarms; until Pater threw her up into the vertical position and presented his ventral guns in a sweeping broadside skid—

Move for move in impeccable formation, the two cruisers shuddered and shook, their gunners grinning in the red ectoplasmic backwash of the cannon – and, abruptly, the hauler was a dead whale, its drive compartments separating and vaporizing in a wild yellow rose of light, its hold sheared neatly away beneath the wrecker's torch. Before the rose was blown, *Atalanta in Calydon* and *The Green Carnation* were up and out, mirror-images tumbling and braking through a loop that brought them back to their wallowing prize.

And before that manoeuvre was complete, the rest of the fleet was hanging at rest in the vacuum, practising fire-control on bits of wreckage. IWG hadn't fired a shot: they were split open, they had spilt their flesh all over the show. One of them was still trying to withdraw, caught by some failure of its drive as it faded into the dyne-fields – a grey, ghostly rubber ball, perished, gaping with pain, neither here nor there.

Little Tiny Skeffern had suffered the entire circus with his eyes shut and his hands clamped round the neck of his guitar.

'Truck, I'm not cut out for this stuff,' he said. He sat down on the floor, drew up his legs and jerked a thumb at Pater. He's off his head, that bloke.' He raised a feeble smile. 'Next time I see you coming, remind me of this - even three weeks on Sad al Bari is beginning to look bearable.'

The exterior screens caught fire for a moment as some thin-lipped gunner blew an IWG Dynaflow to pieces. Truck stared out at the drifting wreckage.

'We've got it now, Tiny. If Pater keeps his word we can take the thing somewhere quiet and chuck it out of an airlock. Sigma-End's a nice place: we could go there and get smashed for a year go back to being losers.'

Tiny watched his fingers stalking up and down the fretboard. 'We don't have to go there to do that,' he observed astutely.

Pater relinquished the flagship to his pilot, who grinned ruefully, made an aerobatical gesture with one hand and murmured, 'Nice time, Pater.' Pater bowed and laughed. 'Dock it now,' he suggested, 'and be careful with the artwork.' The command-bridge relaxed, its peculiar voices diminished. The severed hold section of the hauler crept back into view, toppling end over end on a heading for M41 in Orion, a target it was unlikely to reach in the near future.

'Prepare to board, Manteau,' said Pater over the ship-to-ship.

There was a long pause, full of the croaking whisper of the stars. Someone adjusted the gain of the receiver, shrugged.

'Manteau?'

Himation came on. 'Pater,' he reported thoughtfully, 'we aren't boarding anything just at this precise moment. Have a look out there The bloody Fleet's arrived.'

'Oh Jesus,' whispered Tiny Skeffern, and closed his eyes again.

IWG came out of the dyne-field in three waves, fifty at a time, each spherical dreadnought half a mile in diameter and mounting enough fire power to pulverise Jupiter. Their fire ports were already open, sowing torpedoes like showers of steel needles. *Syringa* and *The Melancholia That Transcends All Wit* vapourised in the first second of the engagement trapped among the slagged embers of the ambushed convoy. The *New English Art Club* ran helplessly through the resulting plasma-front and came out limned with a fire of her own; looping and twisting, ploughed into the last of the escort ships (which was still trying to vanish) and joined it

half in and half out of dyne, ectoplasmic and doomed –

Aboard the flagship, Swinburne Sinclair-Pater rubbed his jaw and saw that it was impossible to disengage. The command-bridge howled and wept, the crew leapt and gyrated among their alien machinery like salmon in white water

'I'm going to ram, bugger it,' reported the *Liverpool Medici*, driving sideways across Pater's bows at a group of three Fleet vessels, and was never heard from again. Down in her belly, gunners threw up disgustingly and cheered the moment of impact—

'Get out of the way and let the ferret see the rabbit!' screamed *White Jonquil* to the *Gold Scab*. She took a hit on the bridge and, her turrets spouting erratically, cartwheeled twenty thousand miles in a halo of tangled struts and hull-plates. '*Now* look what you've done!'—

'—and there's a core-melt on Number Five,' whispered a faint, injured voice. 'Can anybody help—' He died away without identifying himself, merged with the sea of interference—

It was murder.

They winked out one by one, *The Forsaken Garden*, *Les Fleurs Du Mal*, the *Whistler* and the *Fastidious*. Running on to the guns, *Imaginary Portraits* embedded herself in her assailant; they spun together disconsolately, drifting toward far Centauri. *Trilby* and the *Strange Great Sins* collided, embraced, tore through IWG like an impromptu scythe.

A distant bubbling moan, as the ship with the core-melt came back on, pleading. Himation cut across him as *Atalanta in Calydon* cut across the top of Pater's screen, trying to outrun a coven of shimmering torpedoes.

'We've been suckered, Pater. The jig's up. I count fifteen of us left, and I'm getting damage reports from my own crew.'

' if someone could just get a party aboard. We've lost steerage—'

In half an hour, it was all up with them. Fifteen had dwindled to five after an attempt to break out of the IWG englobement: then to two. Tiny Skeffern shook his head and stared glumly at Truck as Pater and Himation skulked through the tragic debris, powered down and on communications silence to avoid detection. Corpses with frosty eyes knocked gently on the hull of *The Green Carnation*, and

anarchist ships like filletted golden carp floated across her screens; while out beyond the eddy of wreckage IWG depended – a colony of fat spiders – from invisible threads.

Parties of pressure-suited commandos began combing the outer derelicts for survivors. The pilot with the core-melt let them on board, then gave up trying to keep it in check – he was gone in a twinkling, the last flicker of the candle. Off the port bow of the flagship hung a great black and orange moon, peeled to the honeycomb decks and still spilling power conduit into the void like mile-long cilia; to starboard, *Atalanta in Calydon* prowled, her hull blackened and scarred, more wolf than fawn.

The command-bridge was silent, full of white, listless faces, its illumination desperate and spectral. When he closed his eyes, Truck could still see frozen after-images of the battle, the thin bodies of anarchists wrapped in white light, aspects of devotion. Beside him, Tiny Skeffern shifted uncomfortably. 'Truck, why aren't we just sneaking off into the dyne?' He was used to the hinterland alleys, the boot, the hasty retreat.

The quarterdeck crew chuckled morosely at this, looking to Pater. He turned from the forward screens, from some reverie of destruction and lost opportunity. 'We have become wreckage,' he mused, as if discovering something behind the words. 'There's a risk in operating any equipment at all now,' he explained. 'If we were to power up, they'd have us triangulated before we could compute a course.' His face was haggard. 'We can't do it, Mr Skeffern. Even the screens are a risk.'

He appeared to lose interest. After a while he went on, 'While we remain wreckage we are safe. It seems as though they have retained the Device, Captain. I'm sorry about that.'

Truck shrugged.

'I don't suppose I'd have known what to do with it anyway.'

'You miss the point.'

'There's something going on out there,' said Tiny. In the distance, IWG was manoeuvring indecisively, individual ships pulling out of the rubbish heap on pulses of green flame – while others seemed to be hastily retrieving their commando units. Wings and squadrons formed, grew, inclined toward Centauri. This obscure performance lasted for some minutes. Wreckage drifted and toppled, raising and lowering the curtain on it. Pater opened a channel on Fleet frequency,

but no-one on the bridge could separate the urgent babble from its concomitant of interference.

Atalanta in Calydon broke silence suddenly. 'Pater!' shouted Himation. 'Something's up – I can see - Christ!' And he began to laugh. 'Pater, it's the Arabs! It's the Arabs! They've had it done all over them—' His ship woke up, quivered, took fire at its stern. It drove away through the graveyard, trailing mirth. 'I'm going to try and get a better—'

Massive jamming overwhelmed his signal.

'Power up!' snapped Pater. Oscillating pulses of blue and violet light washed their faces, decaying echoes clattered round the bridge. 'That fool!' A Fleet dreadnought careened past under full thrust, firing madly at something behind it the way a man stares unbelievingly over his shoulder at a pursuer in the dark It erupted into curious boils and ran into the wreck of the *Forsaken Garden.*

The flagship groaned with mysterious voices (and Truck, wrenched out of his head by mounting alien energies, hallucinated briefly a Roman sundial isolated by a single watery ray of light in a sunken garden, smelling mint, glycol, horsehair) as Pater hurled her up and out. They shot into clear space—

To discover imprudent Himation running under the guns of both IWG and UASR (Navy), with his ammunition spent and big dorsal holes.

Perhaps a hundred Arabs had arrived, cylindrical ships resembling mammoth nuts and bolts (they were, in fact, complete with threads, down which the command and power sections could be screwed at will) and carrying red and yellow insignia. Their ambush had telegraphed itself unlike IWG's - and broken into small unformated skirmishes across fifty million cubic miles or so of space.

'Dyne out!' pleaded Pater. 'Dyne out, Manteau!'

The Green Carnation lurched. Choking smoke began to pour into the bridge. Pater got her broadside on to his Arab and pounded it to junk. A cloud of dyne-torpoedoes, released like breath from a terminal bubonic – the forward anti-missile batteries coughed once or twice. Something ripped them off, and the sweating gunners with them. 'We're losing pressure!' reported one of the quarterdeck crew. The ship lurched again, bellowing and creaking. Pater braced himself and bored in after Himation, drawing fire, yelling 'Dyne out!'

'I'm trying to,' said Himation coolly. 'Don't think I'm not, Pater old chap.'

Truck and Tiny grovelled on the deck.

An enormous hand slapped the ship about.

'I can't hold her, Manteau!' cried Pater despairingly. 'Rendezvous at Howell! Dyne out!'

The Green Carnation was withering away.

Sardonic jungle-noises squawked and twittered from her circuitry as it melted to slag, inflicting terrible burns on the dazed crew. Pater slapped a bank of rocker switches grafted on to the alien controls. She slid into dyne, but it spat her out again, twice. Her spine cracked and flexed. As they went under for the third time, Truck clutching Tiny Skeffern's shoulders and praying with horrified self-disgust that Himation would get it and not them, IWG broke into their communication-channels – IT'S WAR NOW, LADDIE! CAN YOU HEAR ME, TRUCK? HOW D'YOU LIKE THAT? I WANT TO SEE YOU AFTER I'VE FINISHED WITH THESE SNOTTY JACKALS. YOU HEAR ME, PATER? HE'S MINE, AND YOU'RE FINISHED.

TRUCK? IT'S WAR –

Then they were somewhere else.

The anarchists of Howell watched her final firework arc. She burst out of the dyne-fields like a morbid comet, rolling belly-up and launching volleys of torpedoes at nothing they could see, her stern consuming itself in pale feverish radiance. Great rents had opened along her length, her bow was an agonised mouth; her golden fins were bent and charred, her turrets melted stubs. She plummeted down on them in a fog of blind murder, braking savagely: slewed, showed a queer blunt profile. Something tore, deep down inside. She broke in half. The entire northern quadrant blazed up soundlessly, drenching their appalled faces with corpse-light.

The Green Carnation had come home.

Four hours later, they recovered her quarterdeck section from the aphelion of a long elliptic orbit. It was intact, and under survival pressure. VR units leached on to it, opened it up with plasma torches, and went in with respirators, Earthmorphine and a sort of dumb awe. They brought out thirty bodies and ten survivors, all of them blue with anoxia, some suffering from induction burns. Most of the deaths were from subsonic rupturing of the great organs.

Two or three of them were still on their feet, staring inertly round a dark filthy trap full of carbon dioxide and cooked flesh as if they had come the long and significant way round from Hell. They had. Swinburne Sinclair-Pater was there, a hole the size of two fists in the back of his white suit: but he wouldn't let the VR crew give him morphine until they had checked that disgusting oubliette for a small bald musician and a transit-class haulage pilot in funny clothes. They were glad to avoid his bright, somehow elated eyes.

He hung on for twelve hours, in his bedroom at the heart of Howell. Its walls were dim and glorious with blue and gold peacocks he had painted himself. They couldn't cut the suit off him, because of the induction burns: but they pulled five petal-shaped fragments of some alien machinery out of his lungs, where they had embedded themselves as he wrestled mysteriously in the supernal places of the Dyne to keep his ship from falling apart. He woke up only rarely. When he did, his eyes were sunken but amused.

John Truck and Tiny Skeffern stood awkwardly by his bed for the last few minutes, their burns dressed and their faces pallid. Truck remembered little of Pater's ride out of the night. For a while, he knew, the hull of the flagship had seemed to melt or withdraw; all of them, the asphyxiated and the dying, had worn coloured glass masks, or swum in senselessness, fish of the Impossible Medium; all solid forms had vanished in amazing twists and contortions, and he had felt his interface with space diminish, felt it crawl through him in slow, luminous ecstacies. He knew what he'd felt, and it had seemed important at the time; but now all he saw was the stinking dark canister of the bridge, and all he found in his head was a strange embarrassed compassion for the withered figure beneath the printed silk coverlet.

Pater stirred painfully.

'Captain?' A terrible, disfigured whisper, but gaining strength: 'War. The one-eyed bitch has her war at last.' One of his ruined hands escaped the coverlet, touched his cheek – a short hissing breath. 'For decades they've drained the Galaxy; now they'll rip it apart like beasts in an alley. Stop it, Captain. They mustn't find you.'

He drew himself up, shaking fitfully; gazed without recognition at the gorgeous room.

'Did I—?' Irritated, moved his hand feebly in search of a

memory. 'All pleasure devours – Captain! – Dyne out!' He tried to wet his lips, choked. Quieter: 'I could never find it in me. There was too much I loved.' Spurred, perhaps, by this lapse into sentiment, the old Pater returned briefly, full of gentle malice. 'But you have a rich, vulgar iconoclasm, Captain. Let it speed you.'

He sank back, watching the peacocks. Then, after a long time:

'You were there when she bled into the dyne-fields, you saw the substance of her flaring out like ritual evidence of the future. I believe she was near to her proper purpose, then. That's our heritage. Take her. We don't belong in the murk that nurtures Earth. Take her and remember that when your time comes. You've seen Space.'

He frowned. 'Where's Manteau?' he asked puzzledly. Then: 'I flung her out there for a while, Captain, against the dirty chance of dying.' His voice tailed off.

Truck bent close over the savaged face. 'She blew up, Pater. What can I do now? You can't give her to me, she blew up.' Pater was asleep, but the room smelt just like death. He said nothing more until the end, when he pulled himself upright in the bed, winced, shuddered with horror at something beyond the painted walls. 'More laudanum, Symons!' he shouted. He sighed, and a perilous calm iced his eyes. '"Destroy all copies of Lysistrata and all bad drawings,"' he breathed. He looked straight at Truck and winked broadly. '"By all that is holy, all obscene drawings—"'

It was 2367. On Sad al Bari IV military bands played 'Salute the Fleet!', while youths who had never seen Earth fortified the moons of Gloam and Parrot. The green carnation withered on its stem. Howell shrank to a rock. Its animating spirit had fled.

(From *The Centauri Device*, recently published by Doubleday in the U.S.A., shortly to be published by Panther Books in Great Britain.)

RED SKY AT NIGHT

JEAN CHARLOTTE

It was a typical rose-colored afternoon, in 1946 or 197-, whichever. The war was over now, they all said; a time of optimism and all that. So it should be spring, though the trees were still bare. For Sheila, anyway, time had stopped. When she grew up she could take Alka Seltzer and have gold teeth like everybody else, but meanwhile— Is that all she had to look forward to? She padded across the cool blue linoleum (why did people like to have oceans on their floors? What if the house was really full of water, could they paddle around in boats? That would make life more interesting around here) to ask mother.

Her mother was in the bedroom putting a sheet over the smelly baby. She wore her black hair up in the back and curled on top, and an apron over her red dress. The red dress was a good thing, a remembrance of days gone by, but the apron could go. It didn't even match the dress. Of course, Sheila knew you had to wear an apron or something with a baby or you'd get your clothes dirty. She read that in one of Mommy's baby magazines.

'Don't bother Daddy now, Sheila, he's busy,' her mom said. Yeah, Daddy was busy all right. Last time she had seen him, which might have been all of two minutes ago, he had been in the living room yelling 'Jesus Christ God Damn Son of a Bitch!' at somebody over the phone.

'And put some clothes on. A girl your age shouldn't be parading around the house naked. You're too old for that now.' They were taking away all her privileges. She couldn't

have Alza Seltzer. Or at least a whole aspirin. Sheila went into the bathroom and wrapped a red hand towel around her. At least it was different, a bright cheerful color, and it felt better than clothes. It was a nice day and she wasn't going anywhere; who needed clothes, anyway. How were you supposed to learn anything if they kept changing the rules on you.

She went back to the living room. Daddy had left; was it safe to go in there now? She fingered through his drawings scattered about. Her hands were clean. They ought to be. She had used up a whole cake of soap earlier on just washing her hands; Mommy would be specially happy. Sheila wished she had red hair, the color of the afternoon sun on the wall.

Daddy was in the other bathroom piddling. He stood up to do it, not like her and Mommy, who had to pull down their pants and sit. For him it was a convenience, like a faucet, even if it did look funny. 'Daddy,' said Sheila walking up to him, 'can I play with the typewriter?'

'Sheila!' She jumped back. No typewriter, he was obviously still in one of his bear moods. 'Don't ever walk in the bathroom when a man is using it. Don't ever do it again, you understand?' He slammed the door, and Sheila ran all the way out to the porch. She knew better than to bother her mother, she'd already tried that. Who the hell did he think he was anyway, don't go in the bathroom . . .! She had already been in there plenty of times and so had her mom. And they'd both been in there when she was sitting on the pot. Daddy was getting too grown up for his own good.

Sheila went back into the bathroom, boldly opening the closed door and seeing the familiar yellow light once again. What has he done that he has to run away from his own daughter and hide in the john? You can't please anybody around here – why can't they make up their minds? Quickly, without thinking, she raised her hand and cut off that dangling organ he was so busy trying to hide. 'Now it won't bother you any more.' It was easy; it didn't even have a bone in it. Isn't it convenient, how people always seem to have weapons ready to hand when they need them.

Once it was started, of course, there was nothing to do but finish it. Sheila beheaded him, and hacked him into four barely recognizable quarters. 'And I did it all with my little hatchet,' she thought, remembering the story of George Washington. Cherries were red, like blood; could trees bleed too?

The room was full of it now. Sheila turned to leave and then stopped and thought: This is a human being. There must be something here worth saving. Of course – it was his hand. He really was a good artist. She was glad she had had a chance to learn so much in these few short years. But now it was over. She stooped to slice off his drawing hand, the source that had kept him alive for so long. Which one should she choose? Being left-handed, Sheila found it hard to understand how he could get so much magic from an ordinary old right hand. Finally she picked it out of the mess, wiped it off, cleaned herself up so she wouldn't track blood all over the house and make Mommy mad, and slipped the hand into the pickle vat, which fortunately didn't have any pickles in it just then.

Later on she would put the preserved hand in a clear globe and stand it on the bookshelf in the living room where Daddy used to work, like the red wax rose that sat on the living room table. What had that rose been once; was it always wax, and, if not, who killed the rose tree? Was this part of something that happened before Mommy and Daddy got married? That was the usual excuse for everything. Next morning the sun would rise, red again out of a sea of blood behind the swamps and rocky hills to the east, and Sheila would have a whole 'nother year to start over again. After five years a person deserved a second chance. That would save a lot of time later on when other people would be struggling with their father hangups, still trying to disguise their rage. And though she would never talk about it, her true friends would know; she couldn't have learned to draw so well if she hadn't taken action early in life.

BREAK

BRUCE BOSTON

This cell is small for two men. The sun passing through the parallel prison bars casts closed rectangles of light on the worn cement floor. Parquay lies sleeping in a bunk a few feet away, his face a study in pores and stubble; while outside in the exercise yard the marching men pack the baked tan earth ever tighter. No insects escape their heavy tread. No shadows survive the eye of the sun.

Night descends like a shutter when that sun drops below our prison wall. For the next hour the electric bulbs in their protective wire-mesh cages will be our only illumination; then, blackness. Parquay is awake now, sitting hunched on the edge of his bunk, blinking the sleep from his dark, vicious eyes with their heavy pouches, rubbing his hands together to restore their circulation. He stretches and yawns like a well-muscled tom, and the stretching of his thick torso pulls the shirt tails from his pants. Now he will begin his pacing, back and forth, shaking his head with its coarsely cropped red mane from side to side and mumbling to himself. He has instinctively measured his stride to cross the length of the narrow cell in exactly four steps, his toes up against the wall at one end and between the bars on the other, as if he is testing the strength of these boundaries On some nights I try to read through the noise of his pacing, but tonight, this special night, I do not read. I lie back breathing evenly, my eyes tracing and retracing the cracks of the plaster ceiling.

We are two very different men, with different needs and desires. Yet we share the same cell and tonight we shall leave it together. Tonight we make the break for freedom. This is our common need, and as a team we complement each other well. Parquay needs my mind to remember the corridors we must traverse, my skill which has fashioned the key in the

machine shop, my thin, agile hands and tapering artist's fingers to reach through the bars, curve back, and insert the key in its slot. And I need Parquay. I need his strength and spontaneity, his animal cunning and blind bravado.

It will not be the first time an escape has been attempted. Before, they have always gone over the wall and tried to run across the desert. Two or three days later they are brought back with their lips cracked and their tongues swollen black and they are locked in the pen hanging above the yard so we must listen to their cries and smell their dying bodies until they are silent. I have chosen a different route; my reading has served me well. Parquay and I will run inward rather than outward, down through the abandoned cell blocks to long-forgotten subterranean chambers. There we may discover the underground river which will carry us to the sea and freedom. I am convinced that herein lies the only way.

The lights fade, casting our cell into darkness sooner than I expected. All at once I am terribly alive, intensely aware of every sound. Parquay stops his pacing. On other nights this is the time when he comes to my bunk with his sweat and his heavy breathing and takes me against my will. He has told me that what he really needs is a woman, but he says that I am passive and that my body is soft like that of a woman. I have never resisted his advances on those nights, fearing he might strangle me with his hairy paws. But once I am free of this wretched place and he has served his usefulness, I shall be rid of him. He will be a hindrance then: Alone, I might pass along the city streets unnoticed, but there is no way to hide Parquay's hulking frame and heavy bullet head and that flaming thatch of hair.

Tonight, when he stops in his pacing, he does not come to my bunk. He squats on his heels with the base of his back resting against the wall, his eyes faintly gleaming. There is a soft filtered light permeating our cell, and I can't be sure if its source is the pallid half-moon trisected by the prison bars or whether it springs directly from his hard, glowering eyes. I know that my eyes do not shine like that.

Parquay does not move; the waiting is intolerable. Minutes? Hours? My sense of time becomes both distorted and manifest, a net from which it seems I shall never escape.

At last the sounds of regular breathing rise from the cages around us and I feel Parquay's hand upon my shoulder. He has moved across our cell more silently than I would have

imagined possible. He hands me the key that I fashioned, but which he has held, and with the bastard breathing down my neck I reach through the bars. I insert the key within its lock and turn. For a moment it catches. Then the tumblers fall and we are quickly into the corridor.

Parquay leads the way, gliding forward on the balls of his feet. Ahead we can see the light where the hall turns into the guard station. We pause, just before the turn, then rush around it as we have planned.

There are two guards, one playing solitaire at a table, the other watching over his shoulder. Before their slow prison wits can respond, Parquay moves into action like a killing machine. In only seconds both guards lie senseless: one slumped upon the table, the other stretched across the floor with blood spreading from his broken scalp. Yet the noise has raised an alarm. We hear a cry of inquiry from further down the corridor. I point Parquay toward the door we are to take and he charges against it. On the second blow it collapses; he stumbles through amid a rain of dry splinters. I dive after him into the darkness.

The floor of the passage drops away quickly and I nearly pitch forward. I can hear Parquay ahead of me. He is moving almost too fast for me to keep up. The fool will lose our way, the way I have planned, but there is little I can do now but follow.

We race down and down, more deeply into the endless pits below the prison The air is at first dry and musty, rasping hot within my lungs. Then the walls and floors become slimy with moss and moisture and the air is cool and damp. I hear a crash ahead and a muttered oath as Parquay collides with something. Sliding on the slippery floor I fall forward over one of his outstretched limbs.

I pull a box of wooden matches from my pocket and light one. We have come deep, perhaps too deep. I do not know this tunnel. We are kneeling upon its floor and the walls about us are natural cave walls, rough with jagged outcroppings of stone. Parquay's nose is bleeding and there is an ugly cut running across his forehead. Two passages branch from our tunnel in opposite directions. Rising again, I lead the way to the left, lighting one match after another. Now it is Parquay that follows, moving slowly, mopping his bloodied and sweating face with his sleeve. In the feeble illumination nothing is constant. My eyes play tricks on me and the shadows writhe with life.

They have let the hounds loose and we can hear their baying as it echoes down the catacombs. The sounds are so distorted by their passage that at moments it is impossible to tell whether the pack is far behind or about to burst upon us. Such noise is too much for Parquay; it starts him off again. The bastard pushes by me with his fear and his madness for freedom, knocking the matches from my hand. Once more we are plunging wildly into the blackness below, stumbling, colliding with one another, our racing feet knocking rocks, or perhaps the bones of other subterranean runners, clattering against the tunnel walls.

But then at last we hear the river, the crashing song of the blessed river, the way out, louder and louder, drowning out the dogs behind. There is a cry before me, almost inaudible amid the static of the roaring water, and the flood drops away and I am falling through space lost in a moment of sickening weightlessness, deafened by the thundering water, then deep into its icy torrents. I surface somehow with numb hands grasping Parquay's drenched collar. He tries to shake me off and tries to swim but even his strength is useless against the river as we are buffeted back and forth our bodies cracking against one another like two wrestlers hell-bent on mutual destruction. The water is everywhere. It fills our throats. It robs us of our voices and carries us rushing on into the blackness of unconsciousness.

I awaken on a fog-shrouded beach. It is morning In the east the sun is rising like a heavy yolk through the liquid mist. Over the sea, unseen birds shriek a chorus in the salty air.

There is no sign of Parquay.

Moving inland, I walk across a low range of dunes, stripping off the wet prison garments until I am naked. My body seems filled with a new heaviness, stronger and surer.

Gradually, the sand is replaced by vegetation and I am soon in a wood filled with waving knee-high grasses, wild birch, giant sunflowers nodding on their stalks. It is the lost country of my boyhood and I have thrown off my prison stoop and am walking through it swiftly, with an animal grace which is foreign to my limbs.

My throat is parched from the salt of the sea. In a clearing I find a stream trickling into a wide pool. The mist is gone now. The sun burns brightly overhead and as I lean forward

toward the pool I see my reflection rising up to meet me – the hair now tinged with red, my once-pale face blended into that of another, the thickened features, the dark eyes, the jagged cut across the forehead. I dig my rough strangler's hands with their tapering artist's fingers into the turf, plunge my head into the pool, and drink until my thirst is quenched.

LIBERATION

RONA SPALTEN

There are two body types here: Sleek Skins and Brown Hairs. I am neither. I am human, ordinary looking except for the sores on my body. It started back at the Institution as a rash. I was slow and dull and ugly with a hangdog pouting expression and I wouldn't talk to anyone, so they beat me. Then when I reached adulthood they put me here with the mutations who are imprisoned because the humans can't believe that offspring with animal-like bodies are intelligent beings.

This isn't supposed to be a prison, but we all know that it is. Still, I don't mind being locked up.

They put me in with the Sleeks because my size and color is closest to theirs. The Sleek Skins have short pink fur with patches of shiny white skin. They believe themselves beautiful and walk with eyes pointed up, snouts in the air. Sometimes at night when we are all in bed, they will start reminiscing about their parents, bragging about how their fathers put them here by accident and some day they will be going home. To be put on mantles as display pieces, I believe; that is all they are good for. They can't write, or read, nor are they interested in learning.

Then one of them will remember that her father hasn't visited in years and she will start crying. It is contagious and soon they are all crying. How I feel for them, my heart bending with their pain. I don't know who my parents are, but I will start remembering faces from the institution, nurses or wardens who were kind to me and whom I will never see again and soon I am weeping too. Frieda, their leader, if she hears me, will stop them all and call out in the dark: 'Hey Celtic.'

That's my last name: Celtic. Sandra Celtic. I hold in my sobs, waiting, while Frieda waits for the last sobs from her

group to die away. 'Hey Celtic. What are you crying about? You got no family. No one loves you. You got no one to cry over.'

I lie in the dark listening to the muffled breathing, stuffing my pillow in my mouth resentfully, picking at the sores on my legs and thinking of how I will lead their fathers to them someday and become their heroine.

Sometimes my thoughts can be heard. That's how it all began. When the Sleeks hear, they won't believe it and turn away angry. But the Brown Hairs accept. One day there was an incident in the courtyard, I don't remember over what, and the two groups were fighting. I was thinking, *I should write this down.* The Brown Hairs must have heard for in the midst of it all Stella turned about and said, 'Hey Celtic, can you write?' In amazement. They've heard about writing from the humans; as something they can never hope to do.

I, who never speak, couldn't help grinning. I like the Brown Hairs. They are pleasing to look at: shorter, with long brown fur coats, pudgy bear-like creatures. They don't turn their noses up. I grinned and blushed and looked down at the floor, shoving my blouse away to claw at the sores on my chest and arms, basking in their attention.

It was dropped then, but later after dinner they caught me and dragged me to the Brown Hair social room. They brought me paper and ink and asked me to show them how to do that thing: write.

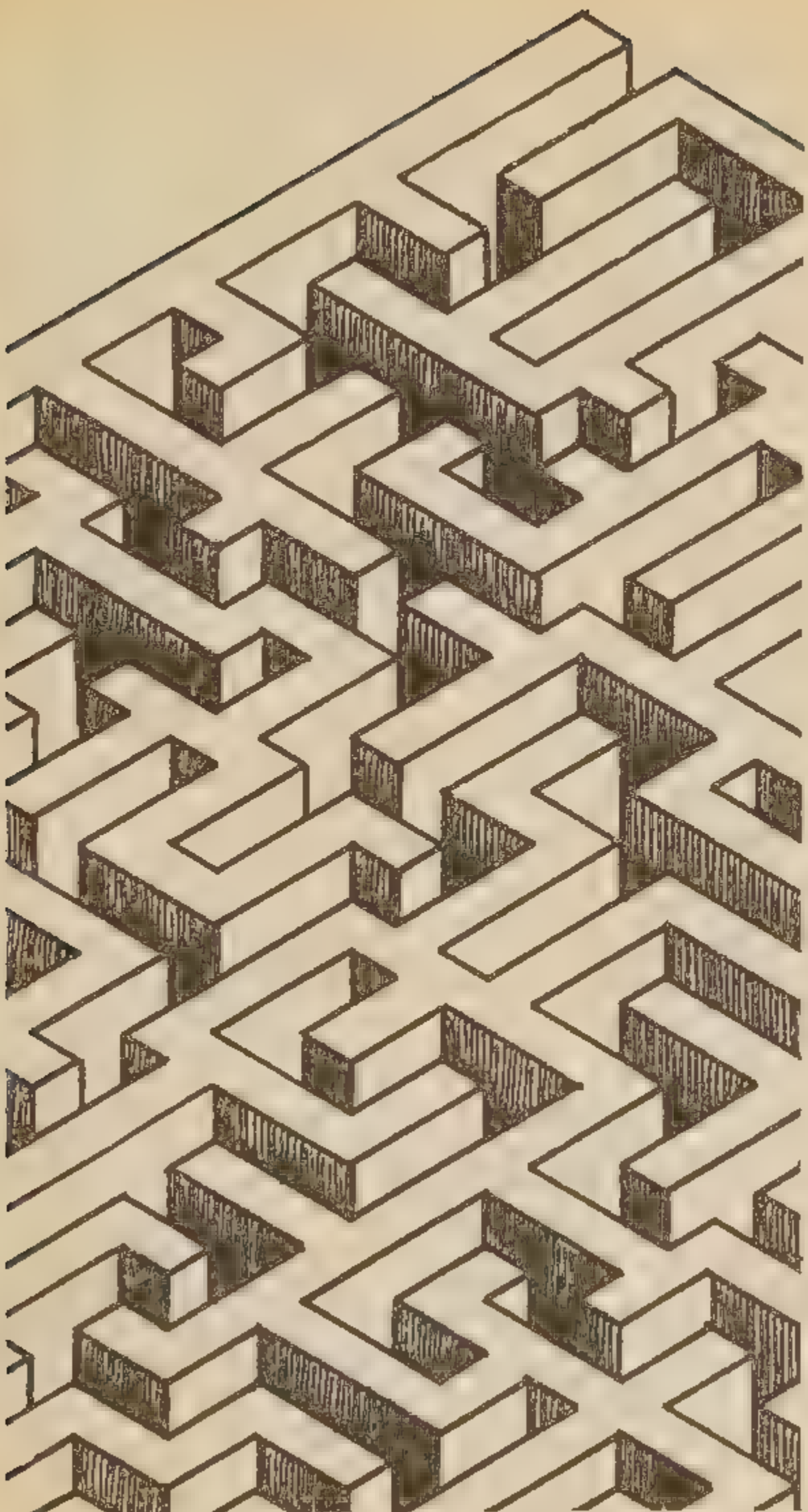
It was a problem. I wrote words but they couldn't read. How could I explain that the swirls had meanings, that these symbols on paper had to do with speech. I couldn't think it loud or clear enough Everything was a jumble. The Brown Hairs stood around me uncomprehending.

It was then that I uttered my first word of public speech. I wrote chair, pointed behind me and said, out loud, low but audible: 'Chair'; pointing, shaking the chair and then pointing back at the paper.

They were stunned. They all stared at me and Stella pulled up a chair to stand on She held up her hands, the palms of which glowed a red similar to my sores.

'Brown Hairs,' she said, and I picked at my arm. 'What has just happened is that she, who was believed incapable of speech, has just spoken! Which proves that it's not that she couldn't, as many of us suspected, but just that before this day, she wouldn't!'

I was thinking hysterically, picking all over my body going



from one sore to another here a pick there, *Please don't hurt me. Don't let anyone know. I didn't mean to. I was trying to help.*

'And I vote,' Stella went on, 'that we respect her thoughts and not tell anyone. In exchange she will teach us to write.' She leaned over to me questioningly.

Yes, yes. I nodded.

'If anyone lets any of these activities, her speaking or our learning, be known to any other than those in this group,' she paused dramatically, 'they will get their heads smashed. Including you.' She pointed to me and I acquiesced in proper fear.

'Agreed?' Everybody let out a 'Yeah', or 'Yea', or 'Yes'. Everybody, that is, except for myself, who quietly nodded, and Stella; for she was their leader and although the others had to do what she said, she was free to do whatever she wanted. Including tell on me. But that comes later in the story, after I had already worked with them for some time, had changed and grown and expanded, would willingly speak the words that were needed in my teachings and had even begun to move faster. It was then that it happened.

She snitched. She meant well but she snitched. There were two new human counselors, Danny and Sobu, and they called Stella to their rooms for private meetings. They told her they were dedicated to making our prison a better place to live and they could only do that if they knew more about the Brown Hairs. So Stella felt called upon to let it be known that the Brown Hairs were secretly mastering the art of writing. One thing about Stella: she didn't mean to blab and she felt guilty. She didn't want them to think I was too normal a human lest they decide to take me away; she merely wanted to brag and place the Brown Hairs above the Sleeks. So for everything she said, she went back on it: a confusing testimony However, the counselors were quite easily able to figure out *how* the Brown Hairs were acquiring their knowledge and they went on to phantasize about the glorious role of saviours that they, with their discovery, could play.

One evening they called me to their room. They were nervous and excited so I picked on my sores, not looking at them, getting involved with the huge one on my right arm, following my usual procedure of pulling the scab half-way off and then leaving it to get infected.

'Come in Sandra,' said Sobu. She was sitting on the bed. I had been standing inside the doorway for about fifteen

minutes. I can be slow at times and I just continued standing there. Danny grabbed my arm, gently lifting my hand away from my sore and dragged me further into their living quarters, closer to the bed and Sobu. Sobu was patting a place beside her. She was very nervous and kept playing with her hair.

'Would you like to sit?' she asked with a forced smile.

I shook my head no. Danny pulled a chair out from the desk across the room and indicated with his hand that I could sit there if I didn't want to sit on the bed. But I continued picking until Danny yanked my hand and shoved me into the chair.

He stood behind me and if I started picking he'd lift my hand away. He must have analysed my behaviour and decided that my picking was a destructive act; so I pulled my blouse open, nestled my head in my chest, gripped the chair, and meditated on the spiritual sore spread across my chest.

After a while Sobu leaned forward and interrupted. She held out her hand. 'Sandra,' she said. 'We want to help you.'

I just sat there trying to make my sore, which had never before failed to help me feel better, glow again, spiral out into its endless circles. But I was too self-conscious and I kept hearing Sobu send out her thoughts.

Listen to me please. I'm a good person. I want to help you. I can treat you better than anyone else has in your whole life and you will be so grateful and love me so much. Oh please let me make this be.

I wanted to help her but I couldn't think of anything for her to do.

She suggested, 'Let me know how you feel.'

Now this offered a challenge. For officially, according to the records, I don't speak. I've made that quite clear; not out loud, but clear nevertheless. So I thought, she wants me to speak in the other way I know: by thinking It was perfect. I stared down at my sore and began thinking as loudly and as clearly as I could: *What a wondrous sore. I love this sore in the middle of my chest. It is so holy and has helped me in my darkest moments. It can glow for you too, Sobu! If you look on it with ordinary critical eyes it will just be an ugly sore but if you see it properly, in the right light, it becomes magical, can consume you with love and happiness.*

Now I'm not sure if she heard my thoughts or not. I could only sense a general disgust from her and I didn't know if it was because she didn't like what I was thinking, or if it was

because she had wanted me to speak out loud and was disappointed that I remained silent staring down at that nauseating sore. Anyway she broke off her disgust to inform me: 'Listen, we've heard that you know how to speak and write and have been hiding this knowledge from the officials.'

I had no intent to hide a thing, I want that made clear. I have always answered their questions with my thoughts. All they had to do was listen.

Danny had his hand out to stop Sobu because she was getting very mad at me and was about to yell. He was a rational man and could see that I had gone back to picking frantically at my sores.

Sobu sighed, turned over the hand she had been holding out to me. 'I'm sorry. But we do want to help you. It doesn't matter what you've been holding back from the officials. Whatever happens between us here we will keep confidential.'

Danny agreed nodding his head solemnly.

'We are here to be your friends,' Sobu added.

They were trying and I did want to help them because I sympathized but I couldn't think of anything to say, so I waited, picking calmly.

Danny put his hand on my shoulder. 'Sandra,' he said. 'Perhaps you could show us how you write for the Brown Hairs.'

So that's how they'd found out. It was no speculation.

He lifted me by the elbows and took the chair away, turning me around.

I recognized the machine on the desk. Oh how I loved those machines. I had gotten to use one several times at the insititution. I was quick to learn and used to be able to pound its even letters on the page fast.

I went towards it. I couldn't have pride. I wanted a machine like that for my very own. So I looked at Danny and Sobu, eyebrows raised, thinking: *I'll show you if you let me have that!*

I wasn't sure if my message got through but Danny seemed delighted and surprised by my interest in the machine and drew the chair to the desk, helping me sit down. He nudged Sobu who had come to stand by his side. 'Now we'll see what she does.'

I began typing words. Any words at first but then words about my sores How I loved them, how they had a spiritual significance for me. I made mistakes and had to go slow,

Neither Danny nor Sobu could believe what I was writing and discussed the possibility that the words were coming out accidentally. How could they think that? I was careful to go back and correct any mistakes. It couldn't have been a random selection.

'She can't love her sores,' Sobu said. 'She must be afraid to type the truth. I read her case history and it's awful what they do in those institutions.'

'We'll get her out of here. We'll take her to the board. She's not a mutation. She's a normal being who needs help.'

So they forgot their promise to keep whatever went on between us confidential. They were too pleased with themselves and began making vows to liberate me. I didn't want to be liberated but in exchange for letting them try I indicated by putting my hand on the typewriter and then on my heart, that I wanted it. Oh how I bribed myself! I should have known better. It was my downfall. I should have insisted that no information leave their lips.

'Oh yes, yes.' They looked at each other. 'It's the only one we have but take it, take it.'

It's a plug-in model, an old one, and it makes a delicious hum. I love it. It's mine and on it I am writing my story.

Some days passed. Then they called me. They couldn't have chosen a worse time. We were lined up on the steps going from lunch to the basement bathroom. I am the bathroom monitor. The Sleek Skins say if they use the same toilets as the Brown Hairs hair gets on the seats and then on their lovely Sleek butts. If I am not there they will try making the Brown Hairs use only one toilet no matter how many others are free and there will be a fight.

So I can't leave. Yet the whole line of us were stopped on the staircase and the loudspeaker announced, 'Sandra Celtic, come to office. Repeat: Sandra Celtic wanted in office. Sandra Celtic.'

I wanted to speed through the lines down to the bathroom and take my stand on duty. Frieda was my partner on the double line. She and the Sleek in front of me had been discussing how ugly my neck is, how my jaw juts out in an ugly perpendicular as compared to the smooth way their necks rise up. I had been ignoring them but now I turned to Frieda with all my anger. I gave her a warning look and thought loudly: *Things will proceed as usual today. You will*

not try to impose any of your segregation policies. But Frieda doesn't like to listen to my thoughts and she lifted her snout regally. I jabbed her in the arm and she got flustered. She maintains that my sores are catching and wants none of them.

Human counselors made their way through the lines to get me. They were trembling and jumped, flinching not to be touched. The Brown Hairs 'ohed' and 'ahed', reaching out their hands and laughing at the counselors' fear. I caught Stella's eye and gave her a loaded look, warning her to behave in the bathroom, to be careful. No fights.

They were lined up behind a long table. They must have been arguing because there was a lot of tense excitement in the air, like an electrical charge. The two counselors escorted me to the chair I was to sit in during the ordeal and then went to places opposing me on the other side of the table.

I was too embarrassed to pick in front of them and I didn't want to expose my holy sore so I rubbed my hands across the smooth wood of the curved arms of my chair and engrossed myself in tracing circles with the toe of my shoe.

Suddenly the tension erupted in a stream of questions: one on top of the other with no time to think of answers. They couldn't wait and I was in a confused muddle until they were stopped by one of their own members, a Ms. Kish. She rapped on the table with a mallet, got up from her seat, placed the mallet down, and came round to me. She was determined to make me look her in the eyes. I didn't want to and looked at Ms. Barter, a professional smiler at the end of the table, instead. But Barter just smiled away, encouragingly, while Kish took my face in her hands and squeezed it, sores and all, twisting my jaw in her direction. She was on her knees. My eyes darted embarrassed to the far wall.

'Sandra,' she said. 'Oh Sandra,' and I thought she was going to cry. 'We are here to help you.'

I had heard that before and I wanted to tell her, well listen I'd like you to but I have everything I want. Can't you just let me go back?

'Sandra,' she began again. 'It's very important that you communicate with us.'

It occurred to me that she wanted me to do more than

just think answers to their questions. I wanted to protest that I was too slow. I couldn't even think that fast, no less speak! I wasn't used to it. I refused.

'Sandra, we understand that your capabilities range further than we formerly believed, that you are proficient at writing, that you can speak and are capable of teaching. Is this correct?'

I nodded yes, cautiously. I had never wanted to hide the information but I was scared about what they were going to do with it.

An elderly man had taken Kish's mallet and was pounding on the table. 'Come, come,' he said. 'We are being too sentimental. Sandra Celtic.' He was commanding me to look at him but I was looking down at my legs. By squirming I was able to make my skirt rise high enough so I could see the huge sores on my thighs.

'Sandra, unlike the people at the institution you grew up in, we, here, are kind, just people and we would like to treat you well, to give you the things you deserve.' He had begun pacing back and forth behind the table. 'We believe that if a person is intelligent, and can write, even if they do refuse to speak,' and he paused to give me a meaningful look; but I was concentrating on my sores, so he went on, 'then we feel it is our duty to help that person learn to take on the responsibility for their own life, to be free to go out and make something of themselves, to go out into the world.'

So they weren't going to let me stay.

He swung about face, directing his question at me: 'Don't you think so?'

No. I didn't; and I was scared. They were going to kick me out into the streets, make me wander through the dark cold world, homeless and scared. And I had just gotten used to this place, had come to love certain things here: the gratings on the windows, the toilet stalls, my bed with the suitcase arranged underneath it, and now a typewriter. They were going to take it all away from me.

The man went on, pacing pompously. 'We are a loving people and want to help, to make up for the harsh, unjust treatment at the . . .'

At the institution. There were tears in my eyes and I was bent forward rubbing my sores. I was remembering the men at the institution, their faces, how they gathered together to discuss and argue my case. They had hoped to jolt me from my slowness and they had proceeded to beat me; for my

own good. It should have worked; I'd wanted it to, but instead of wakening me, instead of my coming out from under fast and sure and quick, I'd been stunned immobile and I remembered how the tears would drip down bathing me as I choked all sound and waited for their affection, waited for them to show me their love in another way, for I did know they loved me, they did care about me, they had loved me and these people here had no right to say they hadn't or that their own love was better or that they loved me more. They were wrong.

Kish was squeezing the sores on my jaw, making me look into her eyes. I couldn't see too well however. My eyes were wet.

'We do care about you and want to help. You can talk to us, tell us your feelings We won't hurt you.'

My feelings. She should be able to see my feelings. I shouldn't have to think them. The pain was unbearable, her holding me like this and I just wanted to be released, to be let go, to go back to my hiding.

The man behind the table was pounding on it, standing between Sobu and Danny and waving papers at me and at Kish. 'Don't pamper her. If she can type these . . . This girl is intelligent and I am sick of the game she is playing; crying and weeping. She must be made to take responsibility for her own life There isn't enough room here More and more mutations are born each year and we can't . . .' He was waving his hand about the room. During his speech I had been overcome with a fit of weeping, my body raked with sobs, rocking myself back and forth, hugging my arms but now my tears were fading and I started back on my picking, crossing my arms and working both sides at once I was calmer and looked about the room. The people behind the desk were all arguing. Ms. Barter was grinning away while the others were trying to tell the old man he was wrong. Sobu said something to the effect that he was using the wrong tactic on me and Danny was pointing to me saying, 'Look what you're doing. She's terrified.'

Kish was trying to grab my arms and I was evading her by twisting my arms around so that she couldn't reach them without standing up. 'Darling,' she said. 'We will help you learn *how* to take responsibility for yourself.' I was just about to think 'Responsibility? Does that mean I'll have to ask someone for a job?' when she grabbed my wrists and I couldn't get free. She had me trapped. It got me so angry

and I twisted and pulled and shoved and yanked; but Ms. Kish held on tight and I couldn't get free. At last I got tired of struggling and gave in, let her hold me.

At the institution just as I would be getting to know a nurse, to feel familiar with her and just as I was getting ready to open my mouth and speak a word, she would be transferred to another section and I wouldn't get to see her again. That had happened several times, and as I looked about the room – at the incessant smiler Barter, and the tyrant old man, and Danny, and Sobu, and my vulgar prison keeper who was digging into my wrists – I thought that these were the type of people who had probably arranged all that transferring, and I decided I wasn't going to let them do that type of thing to me any more. And a new feeling began to rise in me, I could feel it oozing out of my sores, I didn't even have to look, it was exuding from every pore and I looked down at my hands. Ms. Kish's grip was hurting and I could see my muscles straining against her, making her dig harder. So I relaxed, and concentrated, and gathered my strength, breathing deeply, letting my new feeling grow. And then when I was sufficiently prepared, catching Kish off guard, with one powerfully swift movement I yanked myself free; to find myself standing.

I felt as if I'd emerged from under water. I was in shock and everybody in the room was stunned silent. They were sitting there waiting and it occurred to me that they were waiting for me to speak. But I had vowed I would never say a word to them. I would never speak again. Only then a thought hit me and I nearly burst out laughing. For I thought of the Brown Hairs, how they would love to be freed. Unlike me, they hadn't made friends with these brick walls and the gratings on the windows. They would love to be free to go where humans go. It would be a dream come true for them. And so, despite my former resolution, words glided up my windpipe; smoothly, easily.

'Sir,' I addressed the old man. 'If the Brown Hairs learn to write can they be free to leave? And if I can show you that I am teaching them, may I be allowed to pursue my work?'

The man got all excited. 'Yes, yes. My God yes.' For I had spoken two whole sentences and that was a miracle. 'Yes, you can stay. And if they can write, yes, my goodness, they are free to go live their lives anyway they know how!'

The other members of the board were in a flutter, mutter-

ing amongst themselves. They seemed to object; but I didn't want to stay to find out. I wanted to get out of there before the man changed his mind and so I turned and hurried past Kish, who was holding out her arms to trap me back in her hands.

Fumbling with the door, I got outside into the hall, away from them. I was shaking all over, my legs wobbling from so much action, so much decision.

I got to the door of the basement and stood there. I could hear Brown Hair voices from the other side. They sounded angry and I knew there must have been the usual fights. All that had to stop now. I would no longer allow it.

I opened the door. The Brown Hairs were huddled in the far end of the basement, hissing and spitting with their anger and they called to me, 'Hey Celtic,' roughly and vulgarly. I almost turned away, ashamed for them, a queer fear and irritation burning in my stomach. They were so quick to anger and complain and jump up and down but I saw them as being very slow, very cut off from real movement, real direction. I swallowed and moved towards them, bringing with me my glowing sore.

'Hey Celtic. We're going to kill that bitch. Gonna get our hands on a broken bottle and rip out her guts. We're sick of having her order us around. That conceited bitch! Thinks stupid Sleek Skins are too good for brown hairs. Brown hairs on their butts would improve them a lot!'

When they were through, I opened my mouth. Previously they had only heard me speak one word at a time and only for the purposes of teaching, so now when my voice began coming out in sentences, they heeded.

'You will not touch a Sleek,' I said. 'It is necessary for you to work with them. If you don't, no more lessons. With no more lessons, there is no chance for you to be free.'

They stood stunned, staring at me. I was getting pretty embarrassed. I didn't want them to be gaping at me like that. I didn't want to be ordering them about.

At last Stella spoke: 'You mean if we learn how to read and write they're going to let us out of this hell?' She threw her arms up, her glowing palms radiating upwards, the light filling the basement. I knew then, by the calm that had descended on the group and by the holy glow, that there was hope and that all was well. I nodded confidently. For

it was true; I was going to lead these mutations to their long lost souls and get them out of there.

I marched to the water fountain, took cups out of the dispenser and filled three with water. Balancing the third between the other two, I carried them into the bathroom. Frieda had her back to me, snout up. She was standing guard for the others who were going in and out of toilets, some washing their hands at the sink. I brought my cups of water over to Frieda and fumbling, having to do a bit of juggling, was able to lift first one over her head (I had to stand on tiptoes) then the other and finally the third. The wetness dripped down and she turned, licking the water from her snout. She was gasping, couldn't say a thing, just stared at me. The other Sleeks had stopped what they were doing and were hanging back, shy and terrified. The Brown Hairs had come to circle around Frieda so she couldn't get away. They were snickering snidely.

'Stop,' I ordered them. They got embarrassed by my rebuff and truly tried.

'Frieda,' I said. 'You will not segregate these bathrooms.' She was in shock. She had never heard me speak, knew nothing about my powers to read, or write, or anything. She didn't know what to make of it.

'And if you ever want to see your father again' (I knew this was a sore point for Frieda), 'then you will have to learn to write. And I am the only one who can teach you. I will only do so when you start to treat these others with respect.'

I turned to the Brown Hairs, giving them a scolding once over. Their snickering and giggling had gotten out of hand again with their increasing feeling of triumph. 'You too will have to work hard to come to a new understanding with the Sleeks if you want to take lessons from me.'

I turned away, exhausted by so much speech. But it had felt good. I hadn't known I had it in me.

That was a few months ago. Since then I have been working with the humans, have shown them what I am doing and have begun to speak more freely. They have supplied me with tons and tons of books, as many as I could desire, and I have put the ones I used to keep hidden in my suitcase out on display.

They are considering making me a counselor and paying me a salary since I have been doing such an excellent job in

teaching the mutations. Sometimes I wonder if they realize that someday my work will annihilate the need for this place, that the Sleeks and Brown Hairs will soon be ready to take their proper places in society, and we will be out of jobs.

Today Frieda came to me. It amazes me how she has changed. She came holding her snout down, humbly. She was carrying a notebook and used the pretence that she had a question about how to spell a word; but she really wanted to tell me about her dream, her fantasy. She is plagued by it; she can't stop her daydreaming. It is about her father.

'Someday,' she said clutching her notebook, 'I will go to his house. I will appear there, for knowing his name I can look up his address, and I will go to him and sit at his desk. It will be a huge one made of real wood for he lives in a mansion and I will sit down and say, "Look father, I can write. Aren't you proud of me?" Then I will write a stream of wondrous prose and hand it to him. Oh, I can't do it yet but I am learning and someday I will be able to do it as you can. He will be so pleased and I will say, "See I am as good as human. It doesn't matter if my body has mutated. I am intelligent and have learned all kinds of subjects from my good friend Sandra." Then he will be so happy and tell me to invite you to come live with us and . . .'

Her eyes were lit up with such joy and eagerness I didn't have the heart to negate her dream. She would never believe me anyway. I wouldn't want her to. She must find it out for herself; and hopefully I am wrong. But sometimes I worry about what will happen to Frieda when she goes to her father and shows him all that she has learned and it still isn't enough to make up for the reality that her body is different. What will happen when, despite her intelligence, he still won't acknowledge her as his offspring?

Perhaps then, I – without sores, for I have been so busy lately I haven't been picking and they are beginning to heal, to seem a thing of the past – will meet her on a street somewhere, and we will embrace, hold each other against the blowing wind.

ONCE MORE, THE DREAM

aa ATTANASIO

Should reality sound poetical? – Richard Howard

In savage wastes

An artist who has lived and worked for a time in a tin shack on the edge of the desert experiences great dearth of spirit, and one night, exhausted, falls asleep over his notes. He is awakened by a knock at the door, and opening it finds an old Elboga woman. She explains that she has been two weeks in the desert without food preparing for a spiritual communion which took place only that morning, and begs him shelter for the night. He warmly admits her into his shed and prepares to spend the night curled in a corner so that she may have his cot. However, once inside, she locks the door and leads him over into the lantern-light where she sits him down. And then, in the rasp and cackle of old flesh, she informs him that she is a witch sent to enlist his aid. Her tribe, which he knows much of and has visited on the slopes of nearby mountains, is being threatened by the incursion of a large industrial corporation. The corporation's plans to construct a dam will inundate much of the agriculturally useless but spiritually sacred desert. The tribe, knowing him to be a man of strong will yet refined sensitivity, has sent the witch to show him what he can do to help.

After hearing this, the artist smiles and explains that he has no influence great enough to prevent his fellow men from constructing the dam. But before he can say more, the witch stops him with a raised hand and a wan, absorbed smile. From the folds of her dress she produces a brown-

green clot of earth, no larger than her thumb, and lays it on the table. Then she says to him: 'My people are seeking a warrior to do battle with the intruders – not physically, but in a more significant manner. No warrior of our own has yet been able to thwart the alien dominion of the spirit of the metal – your industry. Perhaps you, being one of their kind, will be stronger than we were. The ingestion of this bloodroot will give you the powers of a nightbird with which you will be able to realize the Elboga world.' Then she takes great pains to explain the proper means of preparing the root for consumption.

In the morning the artist wakes up and realizes that he has dreamed. There is no sign either of the witch or the bloodroot, so he dismisses the issue altogether. However, much later in the day, while sitting by the irrigation ditch behind his shed, he spots a small clump of earth that closely resembles the bloodroot he has dreamed about. Picking it up he is amazed by the similarity between it and the one of his dream, and he cracks it wide in his hand, revealing a milky, fibrous pulp. After some hours of tortured consideration, he prepares the root as taught and eats it.

Flying

I'm not at all myself, nosing here, meandering through the leaves, following a faint stain on the air to the forest's edge. I can see four or five wooden buildings, but I am surprised I recognize them - it's like looking out through a lens: edges are smeared and squeezed back from the centers of things. Far off, beyond those engine-sheds, motionless trucks squat ponderous, their metallic reds deepening toward night. Smoke whispers across the work camp. I fly like grass-head waves, gliding over the field along the skirt of the forest. I feel as if the cells of my body have recomposed into this strange land.

I see a yellow light blink through the tall grass from the engine-sheds, and laughter comes up floating from a dark corrie miles away, clearly. I move on, along toward the mountains. I skim through the darkness blind, following traces of odor that eventually bring me to more flickers of light striking through the trees. Tribesmen are burning fires of trash and kindling. They sing naked, leaping through the thin smoke. A child, or one of their animals, is crying. Young men roll smooth rhythms off their drums. I go down among

them, but they can see nothing of me. Yet some sense me, stop, look up – even into my eyes. To them I imagine I am a displacement of air, a sudden chill.

The crying comes from one just born; that was the cause of the song. I see it now. I feel anxiety, too, and know that they are waiting for what they know of me to pass.

I turn into the smoke-weary air and move through the tribe. I catch a motion-smudged glimpse of the dream-witch. Then I arc into the forest, find a stream, and, between the echoing banks, I rush gently over its accustomed way.

The residual years

There on the veranda, when you were very young, your father would sit with you and have you listen to the surf as it fell: the power and inexhaustible freshness of the sea, the rise and roll as the waves tore free and crashed back in overlapping thunder going off down the beach. He would tell you in his impressive way that it is the most we know of time, and it is our undermusic of eternity.

It was your father that taught you how to paint those fans of gold light, sunbursts, and brittle, cold shapes you're so fond of now. He taught you how to write, too: how to petrify the moment, as he would say. And then one day, as you sat with his shell of a hand, wet and cold in both of yours, the light in his eyes, nearly out, existing as smoke, he gave you his millions, his African estate, so that you could sit under the high wind that moans in the grass and whistles through crab's claws and write your twisted novels and paint the dunes as they creep.

The tragedy of it all is that you met and wooed me – and that you won: your eyes, clouded with worldly purity, and your generous easiness beguiled me into this life of miserable loneliness. It is too bad that you are a lover of plain-spokenness and expect it in others or you would have seen that after our first struggling year I gave up on you. The only thing that's kept me on is your money, for what little happiness it buys. You rarely sleep with me – you rarely see me, preferring to spend your time with your native art. I don't know why you keep me on, unless you know nothing of my infidelity or keep that knowledge at a questioning depth that your pride could never reveal.

She stops sucking on her lower lip and pulls her thoughts together. She is Lisa Harpur, and she has just spotted her husband, Klaus, swinging the car into the front lot. There is a curse of gravel as the Porsche swerves neatly to a stop, and then the door opens and a man with heavy, curly hair unfolds into the staring noon. He walks lightly toward the house, a haze of flowering trees obscuring the sea behind him. He has a curly Babylonian beard, a square, intrepid face, and a long, straight nose flaring to nostrils. But there is also a dazed, futile look to him which, though she found it adorable before their marriage, has since become increasingly annoying to her. Now she despises him.

He stands in the door for a long moment, his critical profile examining the return addresses on a handful of letters. He flurries through them nervously, as if he knows his wife is waiting. Entering the spacious living room, he smiles in surprise. Lisa is sitting in a chair of convulsed orange plastic beside a short, dark man with sunglasses and thick, black hair that slicks back and at the same time falls in two or three curls down the middle of his forehead. He wears pointed leather shoes with Cuban heels and dark pinstriped trousers.

'Hello,' Harpur says tentatively.

'Hello, Klaus,' Lisa says. She has a self-assured, intent face. Her hair does not look natural. 'This is Maurice.'

Maurice nods slowly, keeping his hands at his sides. Harpur pulls back his extended hand and wipes it across his brow. 'It's almost summer,' he says, and then removes his dusty sweatshirt and sits barechested on the black marble windowsill, a sharp masculine odor teasing the room.

Lisa looks away, focusing on the curve of the window that stares over the gravel lot. She can't stand her husband. She wants to hurt him and decides to come right out with it, in an even, matter-of-fact tone. 'I'm suing you for a divorce, Klaus.'

There is an extended silence, but Harpur is not shocked. He has suspected as much. He has known for several months now that she has been having an affair with another man. He is not too surprised about Maurice, only by the way she has chosen to tell him. He fumbles for something to say.

His typical confusion makes her feel a bitter quivering in her mouth. She wants to spit hot, acid words in his face. 'I've suffered with you enough,' she says.

Words are fallible. They cannot do more than hint at torment, Harpur thinks. 'I'm sorry it had to be that way,' he says. 'What was it that was so wrong about me?' He drapes his sweatshirt over his freckled shoulders. The skin on his nose is pink and raw with some of it flaked white by the sun. He scratches his beard.

'I needed somebody else,' she says in a voice that sounds certain he approves of her audacious, necessary, elemental move.

The offhandedness of her answer leaves him flushed and stirred. 'You're that "somebody else," I assume,' Harpur says facing Maurice.

The inevitable question. 'I don't want to talk about it,' Lisa says, but Maurice is too smug to be playing any other role.

Harpur sits there with his eyes set clearly under dark, merging eyebrows and smiles one sad, quick smile of amazement.

'Can I fix a drink for either of you, perhaps?' he asks with open, helpless hands.

Lisa shakes her head. Suddenly nervous, she stands up awkwardly. 'No, No, thank you,' she says stepping in front of Maurice. 'I really don't want to stay much longer It's such a strain doing things like this, but I wanted to tell you in person. You understand.' He doesn't. 'I'll see you at three tomorrow afternoon at Draier's. He's agreed to handle the proceedings and mediate with the property.'

Property!

Klaus shrugs off the sudden anger that rises in him at the thought of surrendering even a fraction of his property to this woman and her accomplice. The very idea that she should even consider his holdings as her own grates against his mind like an injustice. Though he has seen it coming, though in fact he feels almost fully liable for her, he feels, too, as if circumstance has really been responsible for driving them apart.

Harpur, framed in the door, watches Lisa and Maurice walk across the lot, arm in arm, leaving him with the bare drab rubble of the place, the dull dry stone, the heat, the emptiness, the human lack.

Crepuscular

It works out a lot better than Harpur had hoped for. As he

and Lisa drive back from Draier's, he feels something very close to satisfaction. He has learned that though most of his property is in both his and Lisa's names, it will be inaccessible to his wife if she divorces him. He is glad, too, that they are childless.

Almost as a gesture of fair play and somewhat more as an effort to regain his trust and assuage some of the damage done yesterday, Lisa has expressed her desire to stay at the house with him indefinitely; that is, until the proceedings are completed. Maurice was nowhere to be seen that afternoon. They ride together along the evening road, silent, feeling no pain.

They are only a short distance from the house when Lisa thinks she sees a movement along the sky, dropping to the edge of the road: a nightbird that alights on an anthill that shudders and rolls. Then, suddenly lifting herself from the shadows into the open road, a native woman stands, arms upraised.

Harpur slows the car down despite his wife's protests and steps out. The native, whom he now recognizes as the Elboga witch, approaches him quickly, discouraging any questions with a raised hand. She stares evenly into his eyes, says: 'You are needed. Take these and fly as the nightbird each night until you find the enemy and destroy it.' She thrusts an animal-skin bag into his hands. He knows what it contains. She turns and walks off the road, and he steps after her.

'How will I know the enemy? How will I fight it?'

She looks over her shoulder and flicks him a hand sign which he recognizes as representing 'strength of spirit' for the Elboga.

When he returns to the car, he explains the bag as a gift from a native friend but refuses to open it for her. They drive on silently into the *veldt* landscape absorbing into the steady dusk that condenses from aquamarine to that slow indigo-pitch.

I am here in the house alone

I haven't eaten in eight days. My head aches with hunger, but I have found a great strength in deprivation. I have flown now for six months and have yet to see the enemy I must destroy. I really don't know what I'm looking for. I've seen countless creatures which I thought existed only in Elboga

myth. Sometimes it makes me feel as if I'm no more than an aggregate of atoms with no flying, no spirit. But other times my flying is more real than my waking, and my body becomes like an unfamiliar mask. Then, as a nightbird, I see too much to disavow the reality of the experience. Sometimes I can almost wish it is not real, as with the burning. I saw that while flying north into the *kaloo*. The elders of some tribe had got him, this native shaman, and they judged him guilty of black arts. Wood is scarce on the *kaloo*, so the bonfire attracted many tribe's people, and the screams attracted more and more. The death was horrible. His legs were blistered poles on which the black sap bubbled and burst as he howled.

Yesterday, the Elboga witch came to me again. She says the time for the battle is soon. I am still confused about the nature of my enemy and I asked her about this. All she would say is that it appears differently to everyone. That leaves me with just my sense of smell to find it. I have been using it for so long now, tracing down every uncomfortable scent, that I suspect the method is inadequate. And even if I should find this particular spirit, I know no way of combating it. She tells me, also, that it is mindless, and that if there were any way of describing the fighting techniques of spirits she would do so for me. There is no way to learn except by acting. This is all she says.

I think that Lisa knows what I have been doing. That is, I have seen her often at her window when I return at dawn. I think somehow, though I'm not sure how, she sees me, too. Last week, I caught her in my study. She had found the notes I'd taken from all of my previous flights. I don't know how much of them she read.

Maurice is a ghost to me. We have never exchanged words, touched, conducted any of the affirmations of identity that regularly pass between men. He is the apotheosis of Lisa's hatred for me. He is not real, but he continues in my life like a disease. Generally, when I return from the night, I fall into a deep sleep of dreams that contain him as a silhouette of habit, a ghost of motion peering out at me through dark glasses with sticky indifference. He never talks.

But the bloodroot offers me release when I am exhausted and do not want to sleep and suffer those dreams. The only time that I have left to write is while I wait for the root to take effect. I have not seen the day in weeks. But the reversal

is fair. The night is not the opposite of the day: it's another world. It is, I think, good that I have seen it.

The root is coming over me now. The desk is dissolved in darkness. I am in touch with sounds, listening to the warm red water racing in the sewers of my body, or the moths, soft as eyelids, or the rain wiping its wet wings on the windowpane...

Street fighting

An owl's call scrapes the stillness. Everywhere is the slow gleam of stars, the moon's distilling. Another owl call, like a human cry, cuts across a dream.

I swing in a single arc from shore to hill, drifting with the wind under those clouds. There is nothing to see. Little more than a black *kopje-crest* and, there, another in the company of anthills.

Leaning down I hear the subterranean water but nothing else. For as far around me as I can see in this airy and woodless space, there is nothing.

I lift up and move for kilometers in a slow and stopless curve southwards. The land around me is becoming more grassy. Wide farms go by, and canals dark and thick from industrial froth become more frequent. I enter a shanty town across an acre of dismantled cars and run behind the backs of houses, crossing alleys and paved fields, smelling the fish-wharf, and then drifting along the river's level breadth into the city.

The buildings walk past slowly. Coarse animal calls and the occasional beating of kettle drums drift out from the narrow sidestreets. Smoke and smokestacks, some hissing fire, float by, and the mottled red and yellow tenements follow close behind. Presently, a large courtyard of macadam, floodlit and stretching out around factories and storage tanks, passes alongside, and I leap over to it, smelling the spoor of something living. To my right the macadam smears at least fifty meters to a gaunt brick wall and iron fencing. To my left is a long slow-incline ramp with an iron shuttle car roosted at the top, and to the left of that is the black river. Before and behind me the courtyard extends a hundred meters to the iron faces of factory buildings. I move towards one of them, following the odor.

I don't go far before a siren hysterically screams, and out through a warehouse doorway gallops an iron horseman. I

retreat without thinking, falling back in fear to a brick wall, the black-plumed warrior outdistanced but still charging. His weapons glitter under the floodlights. I squeeze up against a fanged guardrail, paralyzed A blur of lance-blade flashes alongside of my head. I lunge to the side of the crashing hooves and under the whirling net and rise just barely above the snap of a lashing steel coil.

I back off to consider my opponent. He circles below me, sitting back in the saddle. Six months of flying have accustomed me to the bizarre, so that now I am not frightened. I realize that this is the Elboga's 'spirit of the metal'. My initial amazement is caused by his archetypal form · the rider of iron, clanging in the courtyard But now, how to kill him?

He is mindless. I must remember that. Also, he is earth-bound, slow and heavy in his movements, while I have the speed of a nightbird and the strength of a man.

That gathering bravura initiates an idea, and I swoop down on him, skimming close to the macadam. Flying in half light, I slip below the horse to shield myself from the dipped lance, and then I force myself up under its neck. The horse rears wildly, and I snap up from beneath it, complete a half-circle loop and throw myself against the hooded rider. He skitters sideways, swings one arm wildly and clatters off his horse. Rolling nimbly he is on his feet before I can reach him.

A sudden rush brings me clear of his flung web and vaulting coil. Now I parry with speed and air against his short blade while slowly edging him towards the rail-tracks of the slow-incline ramp. He tirelessly carves the air around himself, spinning me wild in front of him, until he takes that one abrupt step that collapses him backwards over the rails. Even as he's falling, I rush up to the iron shuttle car and begin pounding on its brake handle. It reluctantly relinquishes its hold on the rails, and the car leans forward.

I see black plumes rising, and I push with all my strength. The car lurches forward, scratching sparks. The iron warrior is on his knees now, readying his sword arm. I cling to the brake handle, keeping it thrown forward, unlocked, and ride it down the ramp.

My car crashes forward into the horseman. Something slams into the front of me. I am thrown up, thrown sideways. The car rolls screeching to a stop, and my head is dizzy, dripping blood as I turn to see what has happened to my opponent.

'Over here,' she half-whispers into the dark. Maurice pushes his way through a wall of tall hedges, cursing under his breath and fixing his hair. 'He usually comes back this way.' She points north over the dry tract.

The sky is the dark blue of false dawn, and Lisa is a silhouette against it, kneeling into the early breeze. Her eyes sift the distance while Maurice looks around suspiciously at the barren landscape.

After a few minutes in the long grass, she whispers, 'He's coming.' She draws up close to Maurice and points down the sky to a moving dot on the horizon. They watch it for a long time, until it becomes a bird limping in strained flight.

'He looks like he's hurt,' she says.

Maurice throws a hand up in disgust. 'This is insane.'

'You want that inheritance money, don't you?' Lisa snaps and waits until Maurice shrugs his shoulders in resignation before continuing. 'Well then, don't you mind how crazy it sounds, just do it. Do it!'

'You're a crazy bitch,' he mumbles.

They exchange arrogant glances, and then Maurice lowers his gun and nails a small wing over the *veldt*.

THREE POEMS

ALFONSO TAFOYA

Birds of Prey

When the pump
went dry
it wasn't
under those
barrel chested
skies
in Colorado;
not beneath
the grey-green
eyes
of that, that
woman

Or not
in some
emergency ward
destiny
for sirens
pleading
through neighborhoods;
not under
ammonia lights
of dead pain
numbness
with
thirsty nightmares
grinning
over my
too late
body

Nor, not
on cadavered
streets
amidst
innerludes
with my reflection
through store-glass—

From shotgun
blasted
visions
decapitated
like angel clouds
whipped by
uploft winds
pelting
my draining body
swarmed by porous holes.

Up under me
when the pump went dry
I emitted nothing—
no primal straining
no carnal deep moan
no snatch
to catch:

Windy buzzards flew through my mind.

My Mistress

My Mistress
is a somnambulist
she staggers
through the rooms
I have set aside
to pray in.

Her lips form my name
over and over
in silence
I have no recourse
I cannot ask her what she wants.

My Mistress
is High Priestess
of the continent
of my body (with its steep & angular terrain)

She governs
with two-hands
outstretched
forming flowers

& I anticipate
her
like the door
she approaches
but does not
enter.

A Pastoral

Like animated haystacks
moving still air
I jumped from a tree
& the ground rushed to meet me

while the earth
rushed beneath the hushed
water
frozen with the first snows
& the seasons chased
after one another
when summer brought
the river to the farm.

& once, I watched
the after-image
of a pair of lips
puckered
as the headlights
from our Packard
panned the trees
& ground & dust
ate away at the tires
(that had, would never, in any Real sense, move)

Allegro

Haystacks
diving in & out of me.

INSECT MEN OF BOSTON

JAMES SALLIS

Like a man at breakfast who looks up at his wife, Darling why is there a razorblade in my orange juice?

That wife on the livingroom floor with The Times spread out all around her. I just heard Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony on the radio he says, coming into the room, I cried.

'Penn Central is bankrupt.'

'Why are they doing this to me?'

Communication then has again proved impossible o well. I shall go for a ride on the bus he thinks into Roxbury. And wear a white sheet. Do we have any other kind? Will my body to the university hospital and if she wants me she'll have to go through seven years of medical school. I'll deny that I'm married to her. Say I don't know this woman. I think I've seen her in my building. I think I've seen her with a child. It was probably stolen. Why can't they just leave me alone.

He has a ham sandwich for lunch. There is no bread and he uses a bagel. She comes into the kitchen for coffee. She is on a diet and has been eating toothpaste again. You're disgusting she says. 'Yes would you like to go to bed with me.' And that was the last cup in the set. O well. He goes to the window and pushes her plants out.

She is taking a bath. Yesterday, driving back from Concord, they saw a Madonna standing up in a tub among trees. The whole thing was painted blue. Would you like me to read you something? 'Hand me my comb the big one.' He looks down at the pile of clothes she took off. No there's nothing he wants to wear.

She is doing a new painting. But the subject she's chosen,

a huge bottle with ferns, is too large for the canvas. And she paints on the walls. One fern touches a window: she takes the brush away, to step back and look. He raises the window. She paints on the screen.

When she moves the canvas, ferns and leaves remain behind on the wall and screen. A friend has accepted the canvas (which has become a Madonna with child) as cancellation of a debt. The friend frequently brings people over now to 'see the whole painting' or 'experience the totality'. She is generally working, since it is the weekend and this is her only free time, and he makes coffee for the friend and his companions (remember that this is *her* friend, not his, he hardly knows the man) while they sit with crossed legs discussing the relevance and impact of this temporal disruption. The tension generated in the suspension of time between seeing the canvas and this, the rest of the painting. A valid, and heretofore insufficiently explored concept. One says. The friend manages this skillfully, often contriving to let them pass hours in aesthetic discussion before escorting them into her 'studio' to reveal the rest of the painting. She has added apples and grapes to the limbs of the ferns. References to Ovid are inevitable. So is running out of coffee. And the 'fern' is becoming a mad horizontal tree. The friend has to move her aside to show his companions the rest of the painting. He is increasingly embarrassed, uncertain how much of the tree he may now fairly consider 'his'.

Why don't you ever write about me?

I write about your paintings don't I?

You can't write about paintings.

Of course I can. You're standing there. We've been married for six years. Your jeans are spattered with paint. It seems to be mostly green. Your hair is tied back out of your face. You're on a diet. You have two brushes in your hand, one wound in the last three fingers, I guess it's for detail, one between your finger and thumb. That's the one you're using now. You're not wearing shoes and you have on one of my t-shirts. Your breasts are hurting. You keep touching the left one with your hand. There are brown fingerprints all around it.

She drops the towel and begins flushing the toilet wildly, again and again.

What is your name? she asks. He shrugs and tries to cry, but he's forgotten how. They do the Times crossword together.

They go swimming. She looks like a turtle lying on the beach in the sun. Children are diving off the dam.

He meets her at the trolley stop and carries thirty pounds of mushrooms she bought at the Haymarket up the hill. She cuts off the stems and glues mushrooms all over the ceiling and walls of the bathroom.

What does this mean? he says. Holding a piece of bacon on a fork over the pan. Nude.

She stacks plums in the medicine cabinet. She puts her blonde wig on a cauliflower. She stuffs the toilet full of spring onions and closes the lid. She fills the bathtub with small pieces of cardboard that say 'Frog'. The other rooms with popcorn.

Last night they went to a movie. It was a very bad movie called *Mainspring*. An inhabitant of which kept saying Why are you trying to kill me I've seen you in the other room waiting to kill me. As that inhabitant changed its diaper his child talked about thermodynamics. And in the dark he put his arm around her, touched her breast with his fingers.

I will put itching powder in her bra. I'll go out at night and make obscene phone calls to her. I'll put blood on the toilet seat.

She picked up his wallet and threw it out the open bedroom window. 'Frisbeeeeee.'

When she finally came back he ignored her. She stood in doorways but he outwaited her. She took off her clothes and danced for him. She passed out on the floor in front of him. She put rubber bands around her breasts. She got a carrot from the kitchen and lay down on the couch, throwing one leg over the back. Hello he said.

What a sad thing, that tear in her pants Where I could put a hand in her sleep now. Never know how kind I was.

She punches the paint out of the holes in the screen with a pin.

It's Sunday.

As a man might say I've found relief here, a harbor.

'It was an accident,' she said.

26 July/31 Aug 70
Boston

THE THALIDOMIDE KID

JEREMY GILCHRIST

The Thalidomide Kid cruised down the abandoned motorway at an economical forty miles an hour, slowing down only to negotiate the occasional heap of rubble. His tiny feet, bound in scarred, flaking leather, drummed reassuringly on the two full jerrycans of petrol lashed on either side of the bike Good fuel was worth its weight in human blood these days, and he had paid the full price for these.

He smiled, remembering how effective his new armament had been He had only just got the two machine guns installed in time. He swayed his dwarfish body from side to side so that he could feel the short heavy barrels swinging under his armpits, and the ammunition belts caress his sides. That old neurological surgeon really was something special, he thought. It was a great graft job.

He looked up at the porous, poisonous sky. It was getting dark early tonight, and before long the atmospheric reaction would start again. It would be best to get inside soon. His puckered lips split open to reveal a jagged, toothless pair of yellow gums. He remembered a place, not much further north, at the old interchange. Some of the roof was still on one of the buildings. He would be comfy there.

The long handlebar extensions dug deeper into the stumps of his shoulders as he increased the pressure. The motorcycle roared on, bucking over the warped concrete.

The white-hot eye of the sun was bulging and dimming in the west when he saw the girl. She stood looking towards him like a dream in the middle of the road; as he ap-

proached, the Kid could see that she was beautiful. Blonde hair fell in thick tresses from an exquisite, fully-featured head Her body moved in swelling curves under a brightly coloured smock. Her perfection seared his mind.

Somehow he knew that she was not an illusion, even though her existence seemed scarcely possible. His only actual memory of any natural form was of his poor mother before she had wasted away, but his mother's frail grey body was an insufficient basis to produce such an hallucination. He could only think of treasured photographs of the old days, when all bodies had been beautiful. He hardly dared think about it, but instinctively he knew she was real. His heart sang within him as he drew up beside her.

She smiled at him, blue eyes twinkling, white teeth shining. He grinned at her, then flushed in embarrassment, thinking how ugly his mouth must appear to her. He spoke, thickly, through closed lips: 'You want a ride?' She did not reply, but hitched up her smock and climbed on to the saddle behind him.

The Kid shuddered as he felt the pressure of her breasts against his back, her perfect five-fingered hands laced around his stomach. He kicked the bike off and accelerated furiously. Conserving petrol was suddenly irrelevant; the faster he went, the closer she pressed against him. At eighty miles an hour he threaded a crazy, weaving path through the deteriorating remains of a failed civilization.

'This is how it was,' he thought to himself. 'This is the way it used to be. And now it can be again.' He felt almost religious, that he had been Chosen. 'Somehow she's come through the radiation unharmed. And now she's with me, and soon . . .' He shivered in anticipation. Never before had he felt such desire, never before had he felt the possibility of such fulfilment. He could not imagine what was to come, but all at once his mind was totally filled with the image of a baby, fully limbed, intelligent, suckling at this woman's breasts.

They reached the sprawling desolation of the motorway interchange just as the sun was disappearing in a thin, colourless haze. Huge girders lay buckled on the road like scorched insects, surrounded by mountains of broken concrete. Here and there, the gaudy red of a rusting vehicle showed like a spot of blood through the harsh grey dust. Just before the first ruined bridge, the Kid turned right and

began picking his way carefully up the bank towards what must once have been a cafeteria.

He stopped some way from the building, and examined it carefully for any signs of other travellers. His bike and the petrol were too precious for anyone he met to be friendly But he could see no telltale marks in the dust, no movement, no people, no enemies.

Not that he had expected anything else. Hardly anyone ventured outside any more. At first, when they had realised that it made no difference to the radiation how deep they were underground, everyone had come out. But they soon retreated again. Only a few who had, like the Kid, known no other world could bear the sight of the arid wasteland that had once been a living earth. The dwindling bands of survivors, for the most part, lived in warrens of shelters in what remained of the cities, where they could wrap themselves in a painless cocoon of the past.

Only the mutant children of the first year could come to terms with the new environment and live in it. But the necessary violence of survival, and their naturally short life span, were already reducing their numbers. And since the awesome mutations of the Kid's generation, there had been no births of any kind.

Still, the Kid was alert and watchful as he drove his machine into the ruin. Quickly, he unscrewed the handlebars from his shoulder sockets, and jumped to the ground, turning his head in all directions on his multiple-jointed, elongated neck. The girl stepped down beside him as he immobilised the engine. He looked up at her, and the breath caught in his throat at the amazing beauty of her. 'There's a room with all its roof on through there,' he said, jerking his head towards a narrow opening. 'Okay?'

She smiled again, and followed, carrying his pack and the jerry cans. It was fairly dark, and faintly, through the tears in the roof, they could see the stars It was a precious moment, for only during a few minutes each night were the heavens visible. Almost immediately, there was a soft explosion in the air, like a wet paper bag bursting. It was followed by others, till there was a continual roll of thunder vibrating through everything. The sky slowly turned a dull orange, glaring and painful to the eyes. Every night produced this show as the nuclear residue burned itself off in seemingly eternal fusion.

The Kid soon pulled together a heap of combustible gar-

bage with his agile feet; he made a fire under a window, and they sat around it in companionable silence, sharing a can of tinned salmon from his small store. At last he moved closer to her and nervously allowed his foot to rest against her thigh. 'What's your name?' he asked. She said nothing, but only shook her head and stared into the fire. A terrible fear took hold of him – perhaps she was dumb. And at the thought that this beautiful creature might also be handicapped, his heart swelled with pity.

'Yes,' he thought, 'it must be so. No one can survive completely undamaged. But still, she seems to hear and understand, and her body is perfect.' But could it work? His mind fought to accept her imperfection. Again the image of the baby swamped his mind.

For a long time they sat side by side staring into the fire. He almost went to sleep in the warmth of their closeness. She gently caressed his foot, and pressed it into her lap, underneath the smock. After some time – he suddenly realised that perhaps it had been hours – he came out of his trance. He noticed that she had let the fire die down, and felt cold. It had to be, it had to be now.

'Let us make love,' he said to her, slowly, deliberately. She turned to him, her face seemed radiant; her hands moved to his shoulders and pulled him towards her. Her teeth gleamed phosphorescent in the firelight as she pressed her face briefly against his neck and her hands lightly stroked his stunted torso.

He moaned, and wrapped his thin legs tightly around her, pushing her smock high up her waist. His eyes walked through the vague moving shadows of her writhing thighs; he moved harshly against her. She eased his jeans down, and slowly turned him under her.

She pulled the smock off over her head and her heavy breasts fell free. The Kid's mouth was dry with anticipation. His tongue flickered over his lips. Her soft silky hair drifted over his face. She draped an arm behind his neck, and lifted him. He kissed her breasts, curiously feeling the nipples come alive under his tongue. He felt the warm softness of her womanhood, the unchallengeable reality of her, and it was good, so good. Then she pressed him back down again; he lay silent watching her. Now she was squatting over him. 'This is it,' he told himself, 'this is really it.' He felt expectant, triumphant, joyous.

She lifted her hands to her neck. Surprised, he observed

the supple movements of her fingers. He began to feel sadly insufficient. 'She is caressing herself,' he thought. 'If only I had arms and fingers.'

Then he felt the muscles of his brain knot. A high keening sound emerged from his lips and his body went rigid. She was lifting off an entire artificial head, hair, neck, eyes, everything, revealing underneath it all a tiny withered lump, no bigger than two hands clasped together, nestling between her shoulders. From this awful brown thing, which must have been her head, spiky tissues sprung, and ganglia hung limply; a tiny hole in the centre of it pulsed slowly, gradually opening. Two flaps of skin fell away at the top to reveal a pair of staring bulbous frog's eyes. Its grotesque mouth was growing; soon it was as big as his, soon it was even bigger. The whole head was its lips. The inside of the brown thing, the mouth, was pink and shimmering.

He lay beneath her, paralysed in shock. The noise he was making became a shriek, echoing the agony in his brain, as she began to lower her mouth to meet his. He tried to close his eyes, but could not. A long pale purple tendril emerged, swaying from the obscene hole like a gob of spittle, and descended, and touched his lips He tried to close his mouth, but could not. Gently, her tongue insinuated itself into his mouth, and the scabby skin of her head pressed against his lips.

She was lying on top of him, her breasts flattened on his chest, her thighs clasping his hips. As she began sucking his breath into her, she moved her hands up inside his shirt, rubbing his chest. She traced the muzzles of his limp appendages back into his armpits, tickling him there. Her thumbs slid deep into his shoulder-sockets, following the spiralling thread down into the recesses.

As her hands caressed his transplanted neurological cortex, triggering unknown nerves in strange, random sequences, the Thalidomide Kid found himself capable of movement again. But he did not try, nor did he want to, escape. His tongue came out to meet hers, and he twisted his legs around her, squeezing her body into his. But even as her damp, hairy wetness spasmed against his stomach, the twin machine guns began to move. Helplessly they rose, until, hard and perpendicular, they dug deep into the soft flesh of her breasts.

And all at once the Kid became aware of the absolute quiescence in between his legs, despite her constant pressure

there. And he remembered now how it had felt when he fired his guns. And then he realised, with crushing certainty, just what nerves the surgeon had used. He tried to control himself, but it was too late. He could no longer stop, he no longer wanted to.

His knees hooked back till his feet were pressed hard into her quivering buttocks; his mouth sucked her snake-like tongue deep into his throat; at his shoulders her fingers drove him relentlessly towards ecstasy. His whole body was trembling – every nerve echoing on demand, one need that quite transfixed his mind.

Finally, willingly, staring deep into the woman's swollen eyes, the kid allowed the message to pass his brain to his straining armpits.

Outside, the vicious neon sunlight was beginning to bleach the colours from the sky, and under that more terrible radiation the minor atmospheric fusion halted for a while. For a long minute the arid peace of desolation was shattered by the tearing stammer of machine guns, and then the silence of annihilation resumed its grip on the envenomed land.

THE MAN WHO MADE A BABY

A LEGEND BY HARVEY JACOBS

In a certain town which will remain nameless as a worn tombstone lived a Mohel named Bachim. This Bachim was a master of circumcision.

While he worked, he sang And what a repertoire he had, both religious and secular. His larynx was the equivalent of a juke box today, with a menu of tunes that celebrated heaven and earth.

Bachim was always careful and mindful of his responsibilities Had he been a cutter of diamonds they would have given him the best gemstones. As it was they gave him their sons – rich infants, middle-class infants, poor infants – it made no difference to Bachim. He was a fair person. He held to a fixed price. He had pride of craft, a crafty pride, and respect for himself and his tradition.

So far, so good.

Bachim had one trouble that gnawed at him day and night, 'a worm in his apple' as they say. He had no son of his own. He could circumcise for others but never for himself. This pained him greatly since he wanted an heir who would be both beloved child and receptive student. For Bachim had much to teach, so much that doctors came to him for instruction. They could observe his skill but never duplicate his deft touch. His talent came deep from within, 'seasoned in his bowels' as the saying goes. Only flesh and blood could inherit his genius, the transplant of his greatness.

'A snip off the old block' was the vulgar local joke when it came to describing what Bachim needed. Still, no matter

how often the Mohel girded up his loins, when he girded them down again nothing happened. Was the error in his seed or in his wife, Beckala's, pod? Who could say. In those hard times thin soup was the only fertility drug.

Bachim and Beckala produced no issue, only moanings of pleasure and ample perspiration. They were 'out of business' to mint a phrase.

For practical purposes it looked like Bachim was doomed to be childless, a sad thing, especially in those days. For this was a time when children were worn like gold medals, decorations from the Capitol. They proved a man's virility and assured his immortality Also, they indicated a divine approval, a check-mark in the celestial ledger.

Bachim loved his wife so he rejected her suggestion to substitute her for another, more fertile. Oh, the idea had occurred to him, but without teeth. He wouldn't consider the possibility. Also he wasn't entirely certain Beckala was to blame. Secretly he doubted himself.

He felt guilt because his mind dwelt always on business. His nose was not the only thing 'to the grindstone'. While fornicating he thought about population statistics. After all, in his business today's orgasm was tomorrow's contract. Not that Bachim was mercenary. Often he worked under scale or in exchange for meat and vegetables or only a vague promise. Sex was a means to pregnancy. When a woman swelled up Bachim waited her nine months with the suspense and impatience one sees today in the owner of a Polaroid Land camera pacing the long developmental minute. It could be a girl. Bachim's waiting, of course, was always for 'delivery next door', a fact as thorny as a porcupine.

It came to pass that Bachim was walking in the country one warm afternoon to refresh his energies at nature's table. On a little-travelled road he met a wandering alchemist named Shmital. Shmital was a bad name for an alchemist since their job is to change baser metals into precious. 'Shmital changes metal', a play on words, was the cry of children in his town who had little else to play with. It was such harassment that had driven Shmital from his own village.

This miserable and transient alchemist told Bachim his story and Bachim in turn told him the 'snip off the old block' goading he lived with from sunrise to sunset.

The alchemist and the Mohel sat on a stone sharing a meager lunch of salami, bread, and wine from a skin. They

also shared their problems, the human dessert. Bachim at least had fame in his profession, his art. Shmital had it worse. He was not yet established. Toying with atoms of creation, a dangerous thing, he once turned a gold tooth to tin. It was a performance at the home of a potential sponsor, owner of the magnificent tooth in question, and it caused a display of wrath. 'Wrath is not wealth' as the sages put it. Shmital doubted his gift just as Bachim doubted what would now be called his spermatozoa, which in that time could be doubted without being described.

For his own torment, Shmital wore the tin tooth on a string around his neck. As for Bachim, he had the empty space beside him where a son would have sat listening, watching, waiting for a chance to hang out a shingle of his own. It seemed an act of destiny that brought two such men together that fine day in glorious enterprise to mix science with longing.

On the rock they occupied, where there is a commemorative plaque to this day, Bachim and Shmital talked of mutual effort to better their condition. Shmital's knowledge of such phenomena as the Golem made him fairly adept at creating life from spare parts, but there was no market any more for that wisdom Bachim's ability to create gold not from base metals but from creative circumcision 'tailored to the individual need' appealed to the alchemist as an alternative profession.

Inevitably Shmital gave Bachim instruction on construction and Bachim offered information, priceless, on dispensing with the foreskin. 'Tips' of the trade, Bachim called them.

They talked long into the night. When they parted Shmital considered himself a junior Mohel and Bachim had added a dimension of mystery to his already considerable knowledge of the world's ways.

Shmital went off to the west, where the sun sets, and Bachim headed east, which was simply where he lived. Both men whistled and heard the other's joyful noise grow fainter as the distance between them increased. Soon they heard only their private sounds, as it always happens in the end.

Bachim, naturally, had made up his mind to construct himself a son from a basic plan drawn by Shmital on a brown paper bag. He would not make a clay person since that was too derivative of the creation of the Chief Rabbi of Warsaw. A plagiarism suit in the court of Zion was not like

facing up to traffic court. Nor would he rob from graves and take selected sections of torsos, a method Shmital endorsed. It seemed sacrilegious and catch-as-catch-can to Bachim, who was as devout as he was proud. It was both logic and convenience that dictated his course. He would build his son from left-over circumcisions that nobody would miss except for the diehard savers.

Bachim was a man with the temperament of a stamp collector in the days before stamps existed; a man who spent hours by himself. His extended retreats caused no concern, not even to his beloved wife. So when he began to spend more time than usual in seclusion it was attributed to his need for meditation.

Finally, after twelve years, two months, and four days of ardent collecting and meticulous stitching and weaving Bachim finished his firstborn and named him Schtip. He took Schtip home and commanded Beckala to accept him in the manner of a chauvinist Mohel. Immediately she took the boy to her heart. They sent out the story that Schtip had been found wrapped in a lily pad, probably the consequence of liaison between goy shepherds. Bastards wrapped in lily pads were commonplace then. If it wasn't shepherds it was soldiers leaping on girls of the town. Both sheep and war were prevalent so who asked questions? The important thing was that Bachim had a son.

Oh, there were whispers as Schtip matured, since he did not resemble his father or his mother. That was to be expected of an adopted child. The thing is, he did resemble a large, friendly penis which nobody came right out and said but plenty felt in their heads. Yet, Schtip was a warm, responsive child, eager to learn and to do for others. He made a reputation for goodness and sanctity. What more could be required? In an imperfect universe where blessings were counted it was easy for the town to hide its curiosity. So time passed and life went on.

Schtip had a characteristic that puzzled many including Bachim. When a lady went past he snapped to rigid attention.

Surely it was taken as a mark of respect, as it was, but both father and son knew the gesture to be excessive Also, it was involuntary, like a spasm. It bothered Schtip, and Bachim knew he should sit with the lad and tell him frankly that he had been fabricated from foreskins but that he was as loved as any other child, more so since his father had had

to save circumcisions over a dozen years to do him. But Bachim put off the discussion. It was wrong of him. His contentment was total and he wanted no waves. There was plenty of sweet time. Later the boy would know his quaint heritage. Meanwhile, let well enough alone.

Suppose he did snap to attention with too much zeal when a maiden happened by? Was that a crime? The women liked it and called him a gentleman's gentleman.

'One man's problem is another's envy' say the sages. Truer words were never scratched on parchment. While Schtip was at full attention in the village square on a day when the entire female population turned out to take advantage of a sale in the marketplace a troop of the Czar's soldiers rode through on their way to a pogrom. The top soldier, one General Roskopf, saw Schtip standing thus and was moved. He stopped his great horse in a shower of sparks It is said the marks still taint the cobblestones where the hooves slid.

General Roskopf dismounted and examined the demeanor of the handsome young semite who made sculpture from the act of standing firm. He walked around and around young Schtip muttering in gentile.

On the spot General Roskopf commissioned Schtip a Lieutenant in the army, a superb honor. He threw hot water on his new officer to break his frozen trance, put him on an empty horse and rode him off into the twilight.

Bachim was heartbroken, as was his wife, as were the people in the community, especially the ladies. But tales of Schtip's progress came home to the town and pride replaced bereavement.

Not only had Schtip set a standard for attention but he behaved well under fire. The Czarina herself took a curious fancy to the boy. He was now her personal bodyguard and already a Colonel. Rumors flew that Schtip was her paramour, dangerous rumors. Schtip was not only a peasant but a Jewish peasant. Luckily, the Czar had hobbies and went often to border skirmishes. Good came of things. The Czarina forced through liberal legislation and paid bounty for the growing of flowers. She was, as it is said rarely, 'a happy woman'.

Still Bachim wished for, nay, expected a greater destiny for his son than that of palace stud. He wanted Schtip to be a quintessential Mohel, or at least a doctor professor, certainly not a soldier. A feeling haunted him that Schtip was

being saved for a chosen role to the lasting honor of all concerned. He prayed that Schtip would be allowed to follow the path to his ordained climax.

Few things do, but it happened that way.

On a moonless night Moorchil, the village idiot, ran through the streets of that town yelling gibberish about circles of flame and balls of brimstone. This was the same Moorchil who had once gone warning of giant butterflies so he did not have the credibility of a Paul Revere. But still, a few gullibles looked out of their windows and, sure enough, there were circles of flame and balls of brimstone in the sky.

We know now that those circles and balls were nothing more than early saucers from a distant planet sent to explore the Earth, but to the superstitious minds of the time they were news.

The saucers had an antique charm, a baroque grace. Their sides were carved with shapes and designs and painted in silver and gold. A far cry from the LEM, but with primitive dignity. They landed outside the village, hatches opened in the peculiar eggs, and out came hostile creatures, to nobody's surprise. Friends of the Synagogue were not expected.

A delegation of elders went to meet the visitors and offer them refreshment but the delegation was immediately consumed. This confirmed the worst suspicions of trouble and caused feelings of alarm. Bachim, who could read and write with the best, was asked to compose a convincing note to the military requesting help The note, firm but not too demanding, was written, sealed in a capsule, and tied to the leg of Moorchil who served that poor hamlet's communications requirements. The pigeons had been devoured in the great famine and never replaced. Moorchil went bounding off over the fields taking direction from the stationary stars. Idiots and stars have an understanding

Now a message came from the saucer camp asking for more delegations entirely of males. Thinking it prudent to comply a group was formed, this time of youngers, but led by Bachim personally. Off they went, worried, to their rendezvous.

Bachim was surprised and not displeased to discover that the visitors from another galaxy were only gigantic girls, chaperoned it seemed by very big ladies. The biggest and cutest and most intelligent was named Serox, a born leader. She looked over the haphazard delegation and uttered a bar-

rage of unfamiliar sounds in words like numbers. Bachim quickly established that she spoke no Yiddish whatsoever. They were definitely strangers to the area. Still, from the way they carried on and the expressions on their huge, adorable faces Bachim realized they were a disappointed lot. Serox consulted a great map of the stars and Bachim sensed that they had made a wrong turn on their way to another place, possibly a vacation resort among the constellations. Here they were wasting time and fuming, a bad situation.

To create diversion while the Czar's troops mustered, Bachim ordered the young men to dance in a circle. This amused the amazons and made them laugh and jump. Sure enough, with the dancing, jumping and laughing, hours passed until a bugle blew and squads of soldiers flew down from the surrounding hills.

Elation was replaced rapidly by disappointment when the space girls violated and consumed the soldiers on the spot and ended up asking for more of the same. Thus ensued the famed massacre of Chlitz B'yomville Bar Horvatinsk, a subject familiar to every plebe at West Point.

When hope was an ash in the face of such lusty power, behold, on a steed covered with gold cloth and ruby decorations, came none other than Schtip.

Bachim greeted his son in the formal manner, considering the public occasion, but Schtip was at rigid attention to such a degree it made his previous rigid attentions into nothing. He looked as if a wind would snap him, so straight and tall did he sit in the magnificent saddle.

Schtip rode alone toward Serox and her minions, a model of concentration and purpose.

The saucer brigade grew silent, almost mellow, as the rod of a lad approached them.

Rabbis, scholars, textbooks, anthropologists, all are unclear as to the happenings of the next minutes. There was shaking of the firmament, a storm of heat, the sound of screams and numbers, chimes, and gasps to crumble the Wailing Wall. The saucers fired, quivered, and departed leaving only bent grass and a smell of sulphur. Schtip went with them.

Bachim, whose son had saved the day and maybe much more, was accorded enormous honor. A statue was erected to Schtip in the form of a kind of obelisk, enough said. The

Czarina herself climbed the monument and mourned there at the top for forty days and thirty-nine nights.

Then, months later, Moorchil the simple ran again through the town yelling of miracles.

A star glowed in the eastern sky. The world was showered with light.

Philosophers contemplated its meaning. Bachim mused over the possibility of a Jewish planet, or at least a comet. Others came to their own conclusions.

Whatever, Bachim knew he had grandchildren somewhere. And Schtip would teach them the techniques of the Mohel of distinction, skills that guaranteed a living. Babies would always be born The *bris* was an institution as firm as the Chase Manhattan, and ever shall it be so.

BIRDSEED FOR OUR FEATHERED FANS

JOHN CLUTE

Chorusing panjandra in falsetto shill the reader on his rounds: buy me! Buy me! They laughed when I sat down to type, but now I'm Larry Niven! They kicked sand in my face (reminisces Philip Jose Farmer) but now I'm erect. Wham bam (adds Harry Harrison) bam bam bam bam bam.

Particularly biodegradable, like Chinese food, is Mr Farmer's latest ware, *Traitor To The Living* (Ballantine, $1.25), which shuffles through several of his abiding concerns, sometimes faster than the eye can see, and the novel certainly gives the impression of having been written faster than its author could type.

'Gordon Carfax moaned,' it begins, but what he's moaning about (his dead wife) is soon forgotten, along with a variety of other establishing data, like the mystery of his earlier nervous breakdown, and a previous wife, and numerous other hints and half-hints to the reader that Carfax (like most Farmer heroes of late, and like almost any science fiction protagonist you could name who starts with an impaired memory) is in fact immortal, or Tarzan, or Christ, or a super-criminal from Andromeda whose sin was his decision to bring fire to the natives (Kubrick's apes), but please, sir, please, not just a lousy ex-private eye, Mr Farmer, anything but that.

– Aw shaddup, litcrit poof. Get carried away on the flood of narrative, like.

Well I guess it's sink or swim: Gordon Carfax (ex-lousy private eye and now Professor of Medieval History, which is another story we're not told) has challenged Raymond West-

ern's claim to have developed a computer link (called MEDIUM, though what that's an acronym for I seem to have missed) with the dead, who become *sembs* (a form of 'energy') and circle round one another 'in very complicated but limited and repetitive orbits'. No (claims Professor Carfax), these *sembs* are really nothing but unfriendly aliens *imitating* the dead for their own purposes. Beware! Beware! Although the novel initially seems ready to build itself on a conflict between these two views, the nitwit Professor's idea is so ludicrously unworkable that Mr Farmer allows him to drop it (behind the reader's back) while other things are happening stage-front, like for instance the edgy affair between Carfax and his cousin Elizabeth, who claims that Western stole MEDIUM from her father, Carfax's uncle, and (not only that) murdered him too, causing the good Professor of Medieval History and ex-private eye to confront the suave but villainous Western with this harsh accusation, and also causing Western (who is actually a *semb* in Western's clothing, and formerly James Fisk (1834–1872), the Barnum of Wall Street) to change bodies via MEDIUM with Elizabeth, after a great deal of needless stock adventure shticks, which comprise the bulk of the novel. As Elizabeth, Raymond (James Fisk) Western fucks Professor Carfax, then reveals his nefarious plans for all Carfaxes (including the dead uncle, who has by now been completely forgotten, even though he's a *semb* in a boring orbit and eager to have a little chat), and plugs the hapless ex-private eye into MEDIUM, which transliterates him to the *semb* universe (or – more precisely, for Farmer is nothing but precise about data he intends to drop – the *embu*), but then transliterates him right out again into the body of a luscious female whose bare breasts he had once eyed lustfully (presumably she becomes a *semb*, which is a sorry fate, but if Farmer doesn't care why should we): and now they're *his* breasts: and they heave: and he asks for a phone so he can tell the enormously tall red-haired Senator (and never mind how *he* gets into the story) all about James Fisk (ex-*semb*) and his psychotic plan to change all Carfaxes to you-know-whats, and to demolish the world with energy exchanges: and the novel ends with a clunk, possibly at the exact number of words it was contracted for.

What this piece of dizzy bumph most clearly conveys to the reader sufficiently hornswoggled to complete it is a sense of dropped stitches, dropped themes, dropped tropes, and

even the Dropped Unnameable, because sex isn't very much fun either. It's a dangerously shoddy piece of merchandise for Mr Farmer to hawk, and adulterates his brand: for after all, it's only because he can do so very much better that one spends so much time (first) reading *Traitor To The Living*, (second) trying to believe one's eyes, and only (third) dropping it.

Larry Niven – the one with the fixed grin – fills his stall once again with a story from the sequence *Ringworld* was supposed to end, or so he's told us, and though *Protector* (Ballantine, $1.25) isn't half-bad, by now he's stuffed his series with so many irreconcilable aliens and gadgets and dénouements that this effort (especially as it comes early in the chronology that leads to *Ringworld*) nearly shakes the whole sequence to little bits.

Most future historians are properly conservative of their material, and distinctly tend to avoid writing the kind of story whose basic premise would fundamentally restructure the base society it – putatively – adds a brick to. Mr Niven's trouble seems to be a kind of Can-Do optimism about the amount of torsion he can apply to a future history and still have anything left to tell.

Take *Protector*, whose initial protagonist is a sample – from a long ways away - of the long-lost adult form of homo sapiens, come to Sol to take care of an abandoned colony of adolescent Breeders, which is us. Necessary for change-over to adult form is a kind of yam that won't grow here: but which the Protector feeds to a Breeder named Brennan, who soon realizes that more Protectors are on their way from the home system, and that according to their version of how to protect their own Breeders they will make war on homo sapiens, who have mutated slightly: so Brennan goes to Home, a planet established in an earlier volume of the series, and prepares to transform it (dictatorially, as usual in space opera) in preparation for the coming war.

All of which is enjoyable enough, though a structural caesura in the middle of it is sadly mismanaged: but just where do these revelations about homo sapiens and transformations of future history leave Mr Niven's other books? I wouldn't know. I couldn't work it out.

After Harry Harrison's lousy *Stainless Steel Rat's Revenge*, it's a pleasure to note that *The Stainless Steel Rat Saves The World* (Faber, £1.90) comes a long way back to-

wards the form of the first book in the series, fifteen years old now, *The Stainless Steel Rat*, and a joy forever.

If the current offering stops short of a full return to the level of that book, it's because Mr Harrison insists on underlining with a corrosive jokiness, the kinetic rataplan he puts his hero through; and the last thing this sort of adventure needs is wisecracks to eat away at the suspension of disbelief.

The story involves time travel and is therefore untellable.

(A note for serious students: to chart the decay and partial recovery of the Rat sequence, trace the decline of the first book's formidable Inskipp into a pop-eyed gildersleeve in the second, and his virtual elimination in the third. It's a pretty cheap trick on Inskipp, Mr Harrison.)

(A further note for English readers: Arrow Books' publication of the E. C. Tubb *Dumarest* sequence, touted in an earlier review, has begun to appear: without any indication of chronological order; nay, no indication that the books are even connected; and *The Winds Of Gath* is taken straight from the Ace text, not from the revised Ruper Hart-Davis text, which was entitled merely *Gath*, and so may have confused the editors of the paperback imprint in question.)

(Subsequent and final note for English readers: *The Far-Out Worlds of A. E Van Vogt* appears in NEL without story acknowledgements and with a copyright date of 1973 for the Ace original: the stories date from 1937 to 1966, and the Ace original from 1968.)

ABSORBING THE MIRACULOUS

M. JOHN HARRISON

In whatever small corner of Hell they reserve for Protestant academics who have come, by way of a laudable but misplaced enthusiasm (not to mention that frustrated yen for pomp which led Walter Pater to describe the ceremonies of the Low Church as 'starveling'), a little too close to Rome, C. S Lewis is being compelled as a penance to read *Excalibur* by Sanders Anne Laubenthal; in which we discover that Logres, the essential and beatified 'England at the heart of England' beloved of the English ecstatics of the thirties, is really a suburb of Mobile, Alabama.

Well, it's his own fault.

Even Lin Carter, that man of taste so catholic – even eccentric – and prose so explanatory, was a little worried by this final and surpassing failure of congruity in the service of the fantasy-cult. 'Quite frankly,' he admits, in one of those friendly, accessible and informative Ballantine Adult Fantasy introductions of which we've all grown so fond, 'a synopsis of the story-idea made it seem unworkable'.

An understatement (and couched in terms fit to rob us of the Sense of Magic we expect from our adult fantasy – Do not such works, we seem to hear stout Wollheimians cry, spring full-fledged and straining at the leash from the priceless ideations of our authors? They do not. They are synopsised, and junked if nobody makes an offer of money for them).

'An Arthurian fantasy set in Mobile, Alabama?' he muses on.

As well he might; although for a man who in another of those remarkable prefaces (to an offering of Sprague de Camp's, I seem to recall) managed to suggest that Yorkshire

is part of Auld Oireland, which would have seen him soundly set upon in Leeds *or* Dublin, I would have thought the adjustment a trifling one.

Still, he did pause before the pratfall, and must be given the credit due a cautious man; he needed to be convinced. Miss Laubenthal managed it; the whitewash bucket has spilt all over the ring; the band has struck up; his pierrot suit is awash (There! Now he's tripping over the mop! - Even the ringmaster is in stitches!): and we're left paralysed by mirth, dumbfounded, and looking eagerly forward to the tumbles which might follow this precedent or preliminary antic—

Childe Rolande to the Wigwam Came, for instance, or *The Fisher King – Dearth of a President*, for there must be a critical movement attached to our new genre; or yet: *Perceval Along the Swannee River*, which could later be converted into a musical scripted by the Longfellow of *Hiawatha* and the Williams of *Taliesin*, with a score by the Rodgers of Hammerstein.

Again, *there is no actual evidence* that although his chequered career began and ended in Silver City, Billy the Kid did not at some point pursue it in Chipping Camden: we might then reverse this cultural drift (the Myth Drain) by introducing him to the London of Charles Dickens, and thus produce *Bleak Corral* or *The Gunfight of Two Cities*.

After this initial provocation, the book proves to be nothing more than pedestrian. If our Parfait Alabamans don't discover the Grail and the Sword – which have ended up on the Gulf of Mexico as the result of a Welsh migration to the Americas in 1170 the world will go down into a wasteland of mediocrity and contraceptives. Like most Transatlantic interpretations of Nordic Swashbuckle or Celtic Twilight, it lacks either bright red cheeks or inner, musing glow; and it's curiously terminological: as if by merely presenting the words – sword, Grail, Hesperides – one might bring them to life, throbbing and archetypal. The writing is cardboardy, although enlivened on occasion by such accidental jewels as:

> Three Pendragon's of Arthur's line:
> One to lay the sword in shrine,
> One to find it in its tomb,
> One to draw it and bid him come.

Perhaps in the original 'Welsh' (*Plaid Cymru* help us) that

may have sounded less like the doggerel it is. But there: the whole thing is curiously lifeless, it does not convince, it doesn't ring out from the past – which, whatever their faults, its obvious progenitors in Lewis, Williams and Tolkien undoubtedly do. There's nothing missing, but it's a myth without benefit of landscape, written out of an academic tradition, researched, heartless.

No real conclusion can be drawn from this: it was bound to happen after Romantic Religion stormed the US; it offends almost everybody except the Ballantine Adult Fantasy reader, who, as long as the book he's reading bears some resemblance to *Brak the Philistine*, couldn't care a hoot about the origins of a mythology, or its animistic bondage to the rocks and trees that gave it birth; in the end, it doesn't much matter.

If we feel cheated, it's because of the temptation to say: Keep your great banana fingers off *our* heritage. Which would be a little chauvinistic, I suppose.

While we're absorbing the miraculous, we might as well have a look at Anne McCaffrey, whose stuff is never anything short of it. 'Fear Ruled The Lives Of The Wild Talents . . .' insinuates the cover of her latest, *To Ride Pegasus*, and there's some of the loveliest, floatingest drapery you ever saw protecting the privacy of the family group on the cover. Nothing is left to be guessed at, but all is perfectly chaste: somebody's making a fortune out of Ballantine's desire to be, as it were, with it without it.

Inside: telepathy, clairvoyance, telekinesis: all the modern miracles, nicely stripped of their traditional concomitants and arranged with such delicacy as to rival a *Woman's Own* feature on practical gynaecology. Which, indeed, it tends to resemble even in subject matter:

'Lajos threw back his head and laughed boyishly at her deliberate coquetry. He hugged her until he heard her ribs crack and her dinner sizzling.

It was a magical night. Ruth responded to lovemaking with an ardour that astounded her husband: a surrender that left him breathless and not a little awed; as if, sloughing off the onus of contraceptive interference, she could allow herself to be touched to the depths of her being.

If the quality of their loving had anything to do with the

final product, their child ought to be a perfect human . . . There was no guarantee that conception occurred that night . . .

Shortly, however, it was apparent that conception had occurred.'

And there any resemblance ends, for not even the most mawkish of journals, surely, would sponsor such a set of disgusting old wives' tales as are implied here? – Even under the guise of what we might loosely call 'fiction'.

As for the 'wild talents' of the cover-blurb: well, when they're not drifting ephemerally about over the book-jacket in their Ballantine drapery, they seem to be the same old *More Than Human* crew. This time, they've set themselves up in business as frustrators of catastrophe. In fact, at the outset of the book, they do forestall the odd traffic accident; it's only later that a somewhat more sinister function manifests itself.

They droop about in beautiful seclusion on an estate so beautiful that you'd just adore to own it, and everything's, well . . . beautiful . . . for them; they have the nicest things. While all around, poverty and unemployment stalk the city, despair is general, and the social prognostication looks bleak.

With quick, impressionistic strokes, Anne McCaffrey draws a picture of desolation – the 'unfed' do not speak, they 'snarl'; they live, it would seem, in slum and barracks apartment house, in 'Block Q'; they gripe about the poor quality of their food and the lack of work – and when that happens, why, they are given a 'sop' to their pride. And when their pride and their decency and their humanity have finally been taken away from them, they riot.

Which is when our storm-troopers of the mind shrug their pink gauze if not their holy expressions, roll up their sleeves, and get on in there – soothing and containing where the sedative-gas dispensers (installed in every public building) fail.

The poor do not wear Ballantine drapery. They are ugly-minded, and have a gnarly speech. They are misled by left-wing politicians and managed by the other kind. That is their function in life – or in *To Ride Pegasus*, anyway. When they get in the way, they're called 'average egocentric Joe Citizen'; when they're needed to bolster some saggy and simplistic argument or other, they become 'the public' – in

a reverent tone. Mostly, however, they're treated with a chilling absence of interest unless some obstructive stupidity or dancing bear antic of theirs is necessary to the plot.

God knows what sort of misery Anne McCaffrey is prepared to ignore in order to make background for a sensational novel. After the first thirty-odd pages, the hope that her purpose is satirical becomes desperate, then hollow; it's all quite serious and really rather nasty: the presentation of an elite force who, in the face of a terrible situation, seek not to change it for the better, but to make sure the 'have nots' – and that is what she calls them – damage neither themselves nor, more particularly, the interests of the 'haves'. One is left totally bemused and hurt by her complete lack of compassion, by the murder of Reason she incites ('Those who truly understand psionic powers need no explanation. Those who need explanation will never understand.'); by her greasy sentiment and her inexcusable prose.

We used to be able to chuckle gently at her Happy Families and her Lords and Ladies. What a pity that is no longer possible.

ALSO RECEIVED

Masque of a Savage Mandarin:
from Panther, at 30p. Despite its unwieldy title, an immensely readable comedy of horrors by Philip Robinson. What is Coad, the Converted Man, doing to his neighbour with that peculiar machine? None of it's very pleasant, but somehow you can't help laughing.

Getting into Death:
Wit, economy, elegance, and the knife wielded with a sort of wide-eyed innocent bitchiness – Thomas M. Disch is the cleverest observer, most accomplished technician and exquisite stylist in science fiction or out of it. With the result, of course, that he's been ignored by critics everywhere. *Getting Into Death* collects some of his finest short work. Nothing more can be said, except that Hart-Davis, MacGibbon aren't helping him reach the audience he deserves – the layout of this book is claustrophobic and awful.
£2.50.

The Sheep Look Up:
by John Brunner, Ballantine, $1.65. Itself rather ovine in character, *The Sheep Look Up* is a veritable masterpiece of negativity. A month by month apocalyptic diary which fails miserably in its attempt to deal with the 'undeniable truth – that we are killing our planet' and which is, paradoxically, fit only for immediate recycling. To read it would only hasten the destructive process. John Brunner has produced a symptom, rather than a display of the diseases he attempts to portray.

The Chalk Giants:
Keith Roberts, *New Worlds* contributor from way back and one of the best writers working in the field today, gives us a new disaster, a strange pageant-like future full of earth-magic and Treecian empathy for English archetypes. His work is always fibrous, full of strength and honesty, with its roots well down into the landscape that generates it; as in the title, geology and myth are inseparable, which is a lesson many writers never learn. Several sections of this book have appeared in NWQ – perhaps the most powerful being the chilling *Monkey And Pru And Sal*, which, aside from anything else, shows a tough, uncompromising stylist at the height of his power.
Hutchinson, £2.95.

The New Apocrypha:
from Hart-Davis, MacGibbon, at £3.25. John Sladek, fighting a gallant rearguard action against the various crank cults and pseudo-sciences that have been fashionable replacements for thought since the 1800s: perpetual motion, dietary faddism, the 'occult', Atlantis, UFOs, they're all here; and very much alive, chewing away at Reason's poor old corpse as they've never chewed before. Buy a copy and laugh your insides out over the Dean Drive antigravity machine (more than one well-known sf name is represented here, and not too many of them on the side of logic); weep over the credibility of the ESP investigator Soal, who caught his subjects cheating and remarked 'Why make an undue fuss over a mere childish peccadillo?'; and marvel at what must be the most succinct statement of stupidity made this century: 'Einstein and people like Einstein said that the world was flat; Einstein and people like Einstein said that Man would never travel faster than the speed of sound.' – Lobsang

Rampa. Can you hear faint echoes of Donald Wollheim – that faint voice crying out in what its owner imagines to be a desert of cold and mindless scepticism, and all the while surrounded by the mystery of reality?

MAL DEAN

One of the drawings in New Worlds 7 should have been by Mal Dean, who has done so many illustrations for the magazine. He died on February 24th, shortly before this issue went to press. New Worlds 8 will contain an appreciation of his work and reproductions of some of his drawings. Meanwhile, we, his friends, can only say how sorely we shall miss him and how sad we are that his work has ceased.

THE AUTHORS

MICHAEL MOORCOCK was from 1964 editor (and later publisher) of NW and NWQ. His first story in NW was in 1958, *Going Home*, a collaboration with B. J. Bayley and his last was the serial of *A Cure for Cancer* in 1969. He is the author of some forty books, most of which he terms 'Fantastic Romances' (Elric, Hawkmoon, Corum, etc.), including the Jerry Cornelius novels and *Behold the Man*, which won the Nebula with the short version published in NW in 1966. He occasionally performs with the rock band Hawkwind (for whom he writes) and has made a single with his own band The Deep Fix (*Starcruiser* c w *Dodgem Dude*). *Pale Roses* is the first of a projected series of novellas for NWQ about 'The Dancers at the End of Time' (itself the overall title of a trilogy comprising *An Alien Heat* and, forthcoming, *The Hollow Lands* and *The End of All Songs*). He is currently working on the final volume of his Jerry Cornelius tetralogy.

JOHN CLUTE has been associated with NW and NWQ since 1966, when one of his few short stories, 'A Man Must Die', was published. He has written criticism for NW since 1968. His novel, *The Disinheriting Party* (part of which appeared in NWQ 5) is published by Allison and Busby.

M. JOHN HARRISON, contributor to NW and NWQ since 1968, is the author of *The Committed Men* and *The Pastel City*. His latest novel, *The Centauri Device* (of which his story, 'The Wolf That Follows', in this issue, is an extract) is to be published in November of this year by Doubleday and in April next by Panther. He lives in Camden with what he claims to be the largest domestic cat in the world.

The Thalidomide Kid is JEREMY GILCHRIST'S first published story. In his twenties, he lives in Scotland.

In previous incarnations JOHN SLADEK wrote science fiction, under the name John Sladek. His *New Apocrypha*, recently published, is a guide to strange sciences and occult beliefs. *Black Aura*, his mystery novel, is to be published next April. In his next incarnation he will be a science fiction writer, 'John Sladek'. Meanwhile, he's working on a science fiction novel, *Roderick: or, the Education of the Young Machine*. He has written many stories for NW. His novels are *Black Alice*, written in collaboration with Thomas M. Disch (1968), *The Reproductive System* (1968) and *The Muller-Fokker Effect* (1971).

BARRY BAYLEY is a regular contributor to NW and NWQ. His novel *Soul of the Robot* is soon to be published by Allison and Busby.

ELEANOR ARNASON lives in Detroit, Michigan. She recently completed her first novel. Her first appearance in print was with *A Clear Day in the Motor City*, published in New Worlds 6.

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